

**Magic User:
Reborn in Another
World as a Max
Level Wizard Vol.**

Mikawa Souhei

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Magic User

Reborn in Another World
as a Max Level Wizard

NOVEL

3

Table of Contents

Color Gallery

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Character Sheet and Setting Material

Afterword

Newsletter

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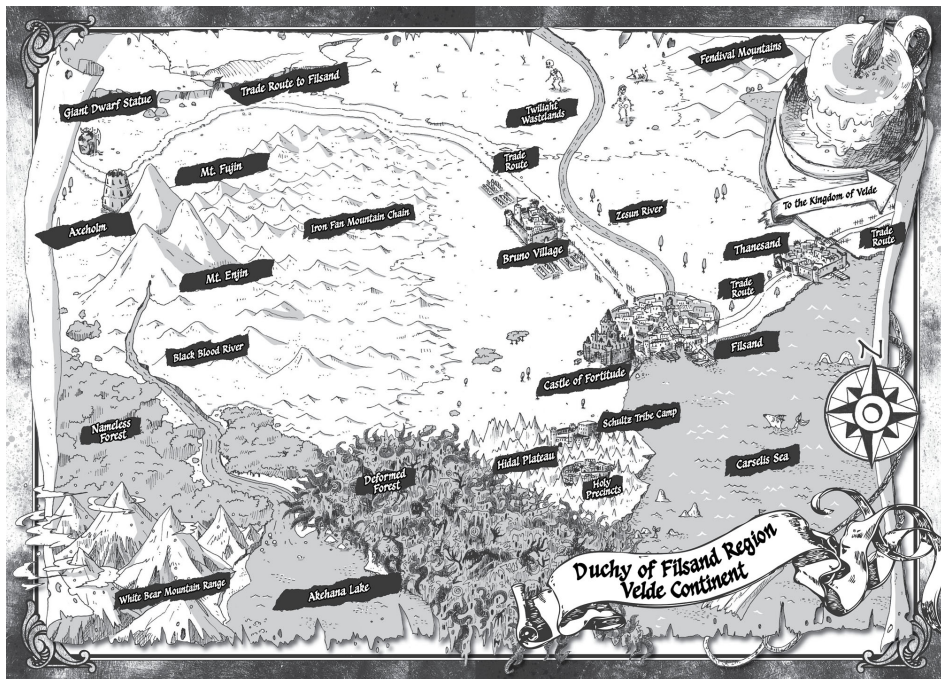
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Seven Seas Entertainment



MAGIC USER: REBORN IN ANOTHER WORLD
AS A MAX LEVEL WIZARD VOLUME 3

MAGIC USER Vol.3
TRPG de sodateta mahotsukai wa isekai demo saikyo datta.
by MIKAWA SOUHEI / Ryota-H

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10.....

Chapter 11.....

Chapter 12.....

Chapter 13.....

Chapter 14.....

Character Sheet

Setting Material

Afterword



Chapter 1

“HEAR THIS, Elisabeth Roney Filsandia. I, Geo Margilus—wizard and lord of Castle Getaeus—shall be your ally henceforth.” I proclaimed these words to the red-eyed girl before me. Even covered in blood, she exhibited grace and gratitude.

Elisabeth had previously said she wanted to know her father’s true intentions. Was it the duke of Filsand who was after her? That would certainly be a blow to what my friends and I had in mind.

Of course, that didn’t have any bearing on whether or not I helped her.

“I’ll ask you just one thing,” I told her. “Did you commit any crimes that would lead someone to try and take your life?”

“You mean besides being born?”

Her response left me pondering what kind of world could make a teenage girl speak those dreadful words with such apathy and calm.

“Now then...” How could I go about both saving her and achieving our own aspirations? No part of this would be easy.

“I see her!”

“Hurry!”

It was pointless to try to hide the magic light. The knights would surely arrive soon.

“Lord Margilus, what are you going to do now?” the girl asked me.

“I’m sorry, but I haven’t been able to formulate a plan,” I admitted. “We could run away or let them capture us...but if you have a better idea, I’m all ears.”

She knew the situation better than anyone. Maybe she could come up with a good way to get out of this. The lady thought for a few

seconds, then nodded. There was strength in her red irises as she looked up at me.

“You have my deepest gratitude,” she said. “Now, I have an idea... Can you play along?” As soon as those words left her lips, she moved to greet the knights with a huge smile on her face.

“Lady Elisabel... We’ve found you at last!” After guiding his horse across the darkened road, Adad dismounted. He was the first of many.

“You can’t escape now!” The other knights also dismounted, one after another, their swords already drawn. But the expression on every one of their faces hardened the moment they realized that it was me standing there with Elisabel. “Huh?!”

“L-Lord Margilus?”

“Impossible! How could you... Wait, what are you doing here?!”

They were surprised that I’d beaten them here. They’d probably seen me return to Axeholm on the shoulder of the massive dwarf statue after defeating the Rust King. They were clearly frightened.

“That’s an interesting question.” Elisabel had said she had a plan, but how did she intend to negotiate with them? For the time being, I decided just to smile, trying to look important and unperturbed. All while evading the question, of course.

“Princess... It was imprudent of us to leave you on your own.” Adad waved his hand, signaling the other knights to sheathe their weapons. He then kneeled in front of Elisabel. His words were respectful, but his irritation was apparent in both his tone and his gaze. At least it seemed he still had enough wits about him not to try and assassinate her right in front of me.

“Now, please, mount my horse. Let’s hurry back,” Adad urged.

“No.” Elisabel refused.

“Huh?” Adad’s confidence was utterly destroyed by the cool demeanor of the duke’s daughter. He may have expected her to refuse, but Adad’s mouth gaped at the ferocity of that refusal. This sort of outburst probably wasn’t characteristic of her.

“I appreciate your concern. And I apologize for the trouble I have caused you. But...” She hesitated, speaking to Adad as if he were indeed a faithful knight.

There was no doubt in my mind that he knew I'd stand in the way if he tried to use force. The only thing he and his knights could do was continue the charade. However, this plan wouldn't keep the knights away from her forever.

"I don't want to be apart from this man," Elisabel continued.

"Eh?!" Now I was confused. While I pondered Elisabel's plan, she attached herself firmly to my arm. What magic was she using to hide those bulges? Her chest was even more voluptuous next to me than it looked from afar. It was right there, just brushing my arm. For a split second, my reflexes led me to flinch; my normal reaction would have been to back up, but I clenched my teeth and held my ground.

I finally had an idea of what she was trying to do, but it sure wasn't what I'd expected. *Wait a second. Just how deeply involved is she going to get me, here?* The knights looked even more surprised than I was. Adad rose from his kneeling position and—probably subconsciously—drew his sword.

"M-Miss Elisabel! What is the meaning of this?! When did you and Margilus...?" Adad couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence.

"Where is your tact, Adad?" Elisabel snapped. "Surely you know that *time* is of no import to a young woman in love!"

"L-Lord Margilus! Explain yourself!" Adad shifted the blame back to me.

I kept silent. While it was true that I'd been gaining confidence and had grown more comfortable in my role as a great wizard, I definitely wasn't ready to play the part of a lecherous older man chasing after a younger girl. But if I were to deny it, she would no longer have an excuse to reject the knights. *If only I were better at improv...*

"Silence, Adad! Master Margilus and I are already betrothed! We go now to Filsand, to obtain my father's blessing for our marriage!"

"B-betrothed?!"

Hold on just a minute! But then again, this whole situation would make sense if it were the stubborn whims of a rich daughter blinded by love. As a vassal, Adad had no right to argue. Normally, he'd just resort to force, but both he and his knights knew that wasn't an option as long as I was around.

It was a good strategy. It seemed that my only choice was to risk my reputation by pretending to be a lecher...engaged to this young girl that I'd only ever once passed in the hall.

"Margilus, you scoundrel! What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"Look...I can explain." I could already tell that a major scolding was headed my way.

After shattering the morale of the knights into tiny pieces with our engagement announcement, Elisabel smoothly convinced them of the finer details. Adad and the knights reluctantly accepted the fact that I would be accompanying her back to Filsand. In fact, Elisabel would even be allowed to stay in my guest room.

That was how the duke's daughter was allowed to return to Axeholm at my side. The first thing the lady said when she stepped into my guest room was, "I would like to announce that Master Margilus and I are engaged."

And that was why Clara was now tugging at my earlobe while screaming at me like a madwoman.

Reyha glanced worriedly from Clara to Elisabel and back again. Incidentally, Elisabel was stuck to my right arm, while Clara was pulling me from the left...not that it matters.

Ild had been pondering in silence, but when he finally spoke, he did it without hesitation. "I think I more or less understand what's going on here. This engagement came about as an excuse for Mister Margilus to intervene in Miss Elisabel's business?"

"That's exactly right, Ild." Nothing got past him.

"So, that means you'll protect her from assassination by accompanying her in the guise of a fiancé?"

"That's right. And I can be confident I'll get an audience with the duke. Then...I will explain to him the circumstances and that we were never actually engaged."

There was silence.

Elisabel listened to our conversation, her brow furrowed. She must have become uneasy at the sorceress yanking on the ear of a castle lord. What's more, there was a giant warrior with strange armor nearby who didn't even blink at the sight. Surely, she was thinking, *What kind of castle lord allows his subordinates to disrespect him like this?*

I did my best to reassure her. "Rest assured, Elisabeth. Everyone here is an ally that I trust."

She looked at me quizzically, red eyes staring. "Allies?"

"That's right. They're not subordinates, and she's not just nagging me. Everyone here is a friend, and they've saved my life more than once."

Clara released her fingers from my ear, but her eyes still pierced me like daggers. She'd only let go because she thought I'd been baited by the lady, and was trying to collect herself. *It's definitely not that she's jealous or anything.*

Elisabel looked around, as if at a loss, but she soon let out a gentle sigh and let go of my arm. "I understand. Everyone, this was merely a charade. Please don't worry unduly."

"I-I'm certainly not worried," Clara exclaimed. "I was simply making sure Margilus quit his lecherous ogling. That's all!"

"I feel so refreshed."

"Hot springs really are wonderful."

"Yes, I really could get used to this."

The girls had taken Elisabeth, still covered in blood, to the hot springs near our rooms.

Naturally, I had prepared familiar defensive spells such as *Detect Invisible*, and I'd also asked the dwarves for extra security. I felt certain she would no longer be in danger as long as she stayed in Axeholm. More importantly—and I don't know if this was from bonding and spending time with Elisabeth naked—both Clara and Reyha had clearly warmed up to her a bit, which was a relief.

After they'd bathed and dressed, we started discussions with Elisabeth. Ild asked the questions, helping us get a better idea of her circumstances.

"It all started when General Darmund of Velde infiltrated Filsand's territory and banished the local clans. General Darmund was granted the title of duke because of his position as the king's brother. That was twenty years ago." Elisabeth started with the basics, painting a thorough picture.

The Schultz clan of Filsand claimed to be the descendants of an ancient kingdom of gods and had a strong influence over the surrounding clans. That's why Duke Darmund had captured the Schultz princess, Shayla, and forced her to become his bride. The Schultz clan had fled to the mountainous southern regions, but the grudge they held against General Darmund—now the duke of Filsand—remained strong. They continued to stage guerrilla-style attacks on his people.

"P-Princess Shayla of the Schultz clan... She's your mother, right, Elisabeth?" Ted wore a bitter look on his face.

"Yes, that's right." Elisabeth nodded in response. "But she died several years ago." Her face was like a porcelain mask, but there was something softer locked behind that facade. I remembered her saying she bore "the grudge of her mother."

I'm sure the expression on my face resembled Ted's.

"The duke of Filsand had three children. Balzard, the eldest son, was born to his first wife. She died a long time ago, but Balzard has always been very kind to me. The second son, Agveil, belongs to the duke's current wife. He is timid and lacks strength. Then there's me, his only daughter and a barbarian."

So, in other words, the duke of Filsand had one child with each of his three wives. Interesting...

"Filsand is now divided into two factions." Elisabeth continued to explain the complexities of her family history, polite and wholly expressionless. It seemed that the duke's eldest son, Balzard, was the commander of the Filsand army. He had long been admired by the vassals of the duke. Agveil, on the other hand, was the grandson of a

nobleman from Velde, through his mother, and had the support of vassals who were relatively new followers of the duke. These two camps were known as the “military faction,” which was made up of long-standing vassals faithful to Balzard, and the “aristocratic faction,” which had a strong connection to Velde and was devoted to Agveil.

As for Elisabel, since her mother was a barbarian, she had no political support whatsoever.

“But if that’s the case,” Ild wondered, “then there’s no reason for Prince Agveil to target you, is there?”

“That used to be true,” Elisabel said, shaking her head. “Actually...a few months ago, my older brother Balzard was killed in an attack by the Schultz clan.”

“I see. So now the military faction is trying to lure you out?” Clara, part of a high-ranking aristocratic family herself, understood matters well.

This time, Elisabel nodded. “It does seem like that. Even if I were faithfully devoted to my brother, those people don’t care about my intentions.”

That means...

“But then wouldn’t it be strange that your father was trying to assassinate you?” Ted, our resident peasant, asked the question I’d been pondering myself.

He’s good...

“You’re right. When I was eavesdropping on the knights, I heard that it was Agveil who issued the order. Although I don’t see how it’s possible my father wouldn’t know about it...”

“You mean to suggest he knows and is ignoring it?!”

“I certainly wouldn’t put it past him.” For decades, her father had fought as the general of the Velde Kingdom, and he remained the most powerful warrior in Filsand. He was also an effective military commander, rarely defeated in battle during the invasion. He used superb intelligence agents to collect information both within and without Filsand. He imposed strict order on his territories and vassals and crushed anyone who opposed or disobeyed him. The duke got what he wanted at any cost—be it land, riches, or soldiers.

“I wouldn’t even be surprised if he pitted Agveil and me against

each other and then named whoever survived as his successor.”
Elisabel’s lips twisted into a self-mocking smile.

“By the gods...” Ted looked horrified.

“Yes, well. This is nothing so strange as all that. ‘Traitors’ are executed monthly in the castle. In the past, he sold all the people in one village who misrepresented their taxes as slaves.”

“Urgh...”

“Whoa...” Now both Ted and I had matching pale faces. I knew the ethics in this world were different from those of Japan, but this was too much. It was as if she was describing the perfectly stereotypical Evil Nobleman.

“Be that as it may. The duchy of Filsand is prospering, so he’s clearly a competent ruler.” As usual, Clara’s take was completely different from mine. Objectively, she had a point.

But still...

“That’s horrible.” In a normal fantasy tale, I would go to see the duke of Filsand—obviously an enemy—and play my part as his daughter’s fiancé, then negotiate trade and an alliance. I was already dreading it.

I started fretfully rubbing my stomach.

There was no particular reason why the duke should turn down trade completely. However, when it came to Elisabeth, it seemed there was an ongoing battle within his own household. If the duke ended up saying that he wanted to banish Elisabeth from Filsand, I might have to take her to Castle Getaeus for protection.

I’m getting ahead of myself. As a great wizard, how can I ignore an evil nobleman? Even if I do have a policy of not getting involved in disputes between humans...

The first thing I had to do was get to Filsand.

I decided to assign roles to my companions before departing Axeholm. Clara, Ted, and the three recruits would be in charge of Elisabeth’s safety. Ild and I would continue to negotiate with the

dwarves. Lade would stand watch over our home base—in other words, wait. I decided to ask Reyha to keep an eye on what Adad and the other Filsand knights were up to.

Understandably, the Star Shield Knights returned to Filsand the next morning with all of Elisabel's attendants, as if running away.

Two days later, things at Axeholm seemed to settle down all at once.

First, Ild and I finished our negotiations with the dwarves.

We signed a detailed trade treaty with Axeholm. The conditions of the treaty were so good that they almost worried me. The leaders of Axeholm showed particular interest in the anti-daemon alliance, and our compact was concluded without issue.

To prepare for developing the trade route, we would prioritize the expansion of Castle Getaeus and building the road from there to Axeholm. Once those steps were completed, we planned to extend the trade route to Filsand from Axeholm, which necessitated tunneling through the Iron Fan mountain range. During the expansion of Castle Getaeus, a team at Axeholm would draw up designs for the tunnel and trade route. Of course, the trade route to Filsand would have to wait for approval from the duke.

Incidentally, Elisabel's original business in Axeholm—purchasing siege weapons to attack the barbarians' fortress—had been put on hold, with the consent of the dwarves.

Also, an Axeholm blacksmith and his assistants would be stationed at Castle Getaeus. I was very grateful for that, especially since I was granted permission to use them as castle staff.

We had really made ourselves at home in the guest rooms at Axeholm.

"Postcard woven with the arcane, reveal yourself to me. *Arcane*

Postcard.” As I chanted the first half of the spell, glittering particles swirled before me, coalescing into the form of a single postcard.

On that postcard, I jotted down our current situation and asked about the situation at Castle Getaeus.

“That oughta do,” I said to myself.

“You’re not going to hand that off to a dwarf or a merchant, are you?” Elisabel picked up the intricately decorated postcard. Instead of answering her, I chanted the second half of the spell and tossed the postcard out the window.

“Fairy of wind, deliver this Arcane Postcard directly to my friend, Sedam.”

“Oh!” Elisabel let out a cute gasp when a little fairy suddenly appeared and caught the postcard, fluttering in the wind.

“Deliver this postcard to Sedam at Castle Getaeus.” Once the little fairy heard the “address” of the postcard, it waved its hand and flew away elegantly.

It goes without saying that the fairy was headed toward Castle Getaeus, where we’d left Sedam to watch over things. In *D&B, Arcane Postcard* was a valuable spell used to communicate over long distances. It was very convenient, but since the messenger had to physically carry a postcard all that way, it would still take two or three days to reach its destination.

Clara was quite taken with it. “Something about this spell feels... poetic, somehow.”

“Especially since, so far, he’s only used spells to conjure giants, daemons, and serpents.” Reyha spoke bluntly, watching the adorable butterfly-winged fairy float away.

“G-goodness,” Elisabel said. “So you can even make fairies like that...enabling you to share information when you’re far from home. Your magic gives you truly wondrous powers, Margilus.” Elisabel’s praise was quite different from the others’. She seemed more focused on the practical benefits of the spell.

“It’s no big deal,” I said. “At least now, Sedam will know what’s going on here.”

“I bet he’ll be disappointed,” Ted joked.

He was right. Sedam couldn't wait to give up his position as deputy lord of the castle. Mora was probably worried. *I sure wish I could see her right now.*

At the very least, we had accomplished everything we came to Axeholm to do.

The next day, we stood before the main gate of Axeholm. It had only been a few days since the rust beast attack, but the gates were already fully restored.

Countless dwarves came to see us off as we departed for Filsand.

"Margilus! Margilus!"

"Savior of Axeholm! Margilus, true friend of the dwarves!"

"May our friendship with the mighty sorcerer last forever!"

It wasn't just the crowd gathered at the main gate hollering. Dwarves were also leaning out and shouting from the windows of Axeholm's towering spire.

"Brave warrior Lade! The strength of the god of fire dwells within his blade!"

"Blessings of the god of wind be upon the dark elf Reyhanalka!"

The dwarves cried out loudly with gratitude, not just for me, but for Lade and Reyha, who'd done an outstanding job defending Axeholm from the rust beasts. They both pretended not to notice.

"Lord Margilus, I pray for your safe travels."

"Thank you, Lord Garde. I look forward to our continued cooperation." I firmly shook the dignified dwarven ruler's hand. At first, I'd thought his expression was hard to read, but now I could clearly see tears in his eyes. The damage they'd suffered from the rust beasts must have been severe.

The dwarves expressed their affection for me not only by cheering, but also in a more direct, physical way. Garde, the Zamslon governor, presented me with a mountain of treasured maleithrilin and mirsdine. I arranged for it to be transported directly to Castle Getaeus.

The Valvaron governor, Gazod, offered a company of dwarven warriors to protect us, but I politely declined.

Although it wasn't out of gratitude to me, Feivel of House Rimron was selected as a messenger to Filsand and would be joining us as our guide.

I had gained a lot from Axeholm, not least of all the trust of the dwarves, this world's technological leaders.

"Let's get going, then."

My friends responded, one by one.

"I'm ready," said Clara the sorceress.

"You know it," replied my chief steward Ild.

"As my Orly desires," Reyha declared.

Only one person was silent. Lade of the warrior clan.

We were joined by the soldier Ted and his three new recruits. The dwarf Feivel and his guards also accompanied us as we departed Axeholm.

We set out for Filsand. In that city, an evil duke awaited.

Chapter 2

DAY ONE of our journey...

We moved along a gravel path, surrounded by rocky mountains. The clear blue sky shined above.

"This is pretty rough." It was rare for Ted to grumble, but he carried the weight of our camping gear.

"Pheeew..." The three new recruits (also burdened with luggage) looked sweaty and exhausted.

Currently, the only road from Axeholm to Filsand was the winding trade route on the northern side of the Iron Fan mountain range. This trade route bordered the Twilight Wastelands to the north and the mountains to the south. It was littered with steep inclines that made walking a chore.

"Aye, but we're lucky we don't have to worry about sudden battles with the rust beasts. Thank Laird Margilus for that," piped up the dwarf walking next to me. He didn't look winded at all. It was Feivel of the merchant house Rimron.

"That's true..."

Behind him was a wagon loaded with items from Axeholm bound for the duke of Filsand, and dwarves from House Valvaron serving as escorts.

"Aye, but just beneath here...the undead wander about. Betimes there are even daemons. Though we'll surely be fine as long as Margilus is here."

"Daemons and undead, huh?" According to Feivel, the undead from the Twilight Wastelands sometimes wandered down from the north. It was slightly less clear where the daemons originated from. We'd eliminated most of the rust beasts, but there were still many dangers.

Either way, I needed to change some of the spells I kept charged, in case a large number of undead suddenly appeared. Since it would be a long journey, I also decided to charge more mobility spells, too.

“It’s rare, but daemons do appear in the Filsand territories,” Elisabel offered from her perch atop the dwarves’ wagon. “I also personally encountered an undead soldier on my trip down to Axeholm.”

She had changed into a knee-length dress adorned with frills and lace, one which was (naturally) brand new. Her blonde hair was pulled back from her red eyes into pigtails. She had a small nose and lips. Every feature on her face was a strength in its own right, but also harmonious with all the other features. I had come across many beautiful men and women in this world, but none compared to her perfect, doll-like beauty.

However, even though she had a gentle, alluring smile on her face, her hands gripped the contents of the wagon tightly to keep from falling off. It was a completely different attitude from Clara, who was walking calmly alongside her.

Ted and the others are having a rough time. I should help them. I saw Ted and the new recruits panting and decided to assist them with a spell. There were already two humans riding on the dwarf wagon, so I couldn’t ask them to take more.

“As a consequence of this spell, an invisible servant will appear and bear his weight. *Sprite Porter!*” I chanted a spell that I remembered using when I’d first arrived in this world. Within the world of my mind, my imagined self released the chaotic energy that dwelled within the books of the spellbook archive, a mentally constructed repository of arcane spells. That chaotic energy—my magical power—overflowed into the real world, manifesting into a porter with an invisible body.

“Agh...!”

“Whoa!”

The luggage that the new recruits were carrying was lifted into the air, surprising not only them, but Elisabel, too.

“L-Lord Margilus. We’re doing just fine!”

“Y-yeah, n-no need to worry about us.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” I assured them. “It’s only a Rank 1 spell anyway.” Ted and the new recruits were feeling guilty, so I tried to explain that it was no big deal. I just needed to charge any spells I used today the next morning, so it was no trouble at all.

For some reason, Elisabel and Clara stared at Ted and the others, who meekly bowed toward me, each with their own complicated expression.

That afternoon...

“Let’s camp here, then.” In Sedam’s absence, Ted gave the instructions for moving and setting up camp.

“Mmm.” At his direction, the three recruits pitched the tents, built a fire, and started to prepare a meal.

Ild helped them, while Reyha patrolled the perimeter. Feivel and the other dwarves prepared their own camp some distance away. As usual, Lade silently set up his own simple tent.

“Thank you for doing this,” I said. As always, I could do nothing but sit and watch these chores unfold. I tried to maintain a serious expression, fit for the lord of a castle, but try as I might, something about the whole process still made me uncomfortable.

“Don’t mention it! These are the duties of castle soldiers!”

“Oh, will you get that makeup box for me?” Clara also set herself apart from chores, but she was used to having people work for her.

A recruit hopped right to it. “Yes, gladly!” I felt confident that it wasn’t only the differences in gender and appearance that made Ted and the new recruits so happy to care for her. It was status. She was an aristocrat; they were commoners.

“Is this canel tea?” Naturally, as the daughter of a duke, Elisabel sat with Clara and me, relaxing.

“Sometimes we get tired of sil tea,” Clara answered, before leaning in to whisper to me. Reyha had prepared our cups before setting out on patrol. “Margilus? I’d like to share my opinion about what happened this afternoon.”

“Hmm?”

What this beautiful blonde wanted to bring up with me, wearing such a serious expression on her face, was the way I’d used *Sprite Porter* to carry our soldiers’ luggage. Apparently, as their lord, sharing any of

my subordinates' work was a bad move, one that disturbed the hierarchy and natural order of things.

Hmmm, so that's the reason she was upset? I guess that's what you get in a class-based society. This was fundamentally different from the ethics of a modern perspective, where even though there were disparities in authority depending on role and position, all humans were of equal value.

"But it was only a Rank 1 spell, so I thought..."

"No matter what level the spell is, you stole their jobs. Perhaps if Ted and his team were only mercenaries, it would be acceptable. But the point is that they're happy working for you."

"R-really?" I quietly watched them working hard to set up the tent and prepare the food. They worked quickly, joking around with each other. They certainly didn't look like they were unhappy. But Clara wouldn't have spoken without cause.

"Pay attention. Aristocrats must attend to aristocratic duties, warriors must be warriors, and commoners likewise have their own role. Your job is to do the work that only a wizard and a castle lord can do."

"Hmm..." Although Clara was a noble, she didn't feel any bias or malice toward people of lower stations. I'd always respected that. Her opinion was clearly considered the correct way to go about things in Sedia. As a resident of this world, I needed to respect its norms as well.

"Yeah...you're right. I'll try to keep that in mind, but it's just..." It wasn't that I thought Japan's ethics and perspective were inherently superior, or that I had an inflated opinion of myself, but there were still certain things I found it hard to get over. For example, when the boys who'd been candidates to become sorcerer-soldiers were forced out partway through the program.

"It's like this," I continued. "One of the duties of a wizard is to cast aside the common sense and reason of the mortal world when necessary. Or...at least, that's what I think..."

"Where is your confidence?" Clara looked me straight in the eyes, disgusted. Without waiting for me to answer, she crossed her arms across her voluptuous breasts and dropped her head. "But you're not wrong. That's why you're the 'Great Wizard,' after all. If by chance the time comes when you have to stand against the laws of this land...then

I will support your decision, even if it means going against the hierarchy.”

“Er, umm... I’m very grateful.” Clara sometimes caught me off guard like this. She was always clever. *Be careful, Clara, or I might get the wrong idea...*

Anyway, I’d grown used to the audacious way she spoke to me. In fact, I appreciated it.

“You are the complete opposite of my father,” Elisabel murmured, looking down into the cup in her hand. She had been listening in on my conversation with Clara, and now had a dumbfounded look on her face.

“I’m sure I’m different, but the opposite?”

“Yes.” Elisabel lifted her face and looked right at me with her red eyes. “My father occupies the seat of highest authority in Filsand. He also probably has the greatest physical strength of any individual. And the only time when he unreservedly uses that power is when he’s fulfilling his own selfish desires. In fact, he believes that is the way things should be.”

“I see. We really are about as different as it gets.” I used my power for others; the duke used his power only for himself. If I were twenty or thirty years younger, I’m sure I would have thought it was my duty to defeat him.

For some reason, I was becoming more and more interested in this duke of Filsand. I was a man who resisted the temptation to use my powers for myself. But if I gave in...what would that feel like?

A few days had passed since Geo’s team departed Axeholm.

In the lands beyond, there loomed a black fortress built along a row of cliffs. It was a secure, fortified castle. This was the residence of Duke Darmund Ferday Filsand, ruler of the duchy of Filsand.

While standing in wait, Adad of the Filsand knights broke from the ranks.

Directly before Adad, a single man sat upon a glorious chair with a frighteningly tall back. He looked to be in his early forties. A simple

crown sat upon his head, and his magnificent beard hung down toward the bottom of his chest. He was tanned and muscular underneath his chainmail armor. Over that steel, he'd donned a gown adorned with gold and silver. Across his lap lay a longsword, as if to show that he was always prepared to do battle. The chainmail, sword, rings, and charms he wore were all imbued with the strongest magic available in Velde. The duke's record in battle attested to his worthiness of all these riches.

And now he glared down upon his servant.

"And then? You just accepted what Elisabeth said and dragged your ass back here?"

"Eh heh...eh heh heh! I beg your forgiveness, my lord!" As he prostrated himself before his liege, Adad's body trembled, and his eyes glistened. Enduring the glare of his master, he didn't even have the wherewithal to notice the ice-cold gaze of his subordinate knights standing at attention.

There were four other important figures in attendance to hear his report. Standing to the left of the throne was a beautiful woman in her thirties. She was Alaine, the second first-wife of the duke, and daughter of a great aristocrat from Velde. She worked as a liaison between her home country and the lower-ranking nobility. She stood at the very top of the aristocratic faction. The slender young man standing—almost hidden—behind her was Agveil, the second son of the duke. While his name was enough to validate him, he was also commander of the Star Shield Knights. On the other side of Alaine was an old man with white hair. That was Juzell, prime minister of the duchy. He was the current leader of the military faction, which was made up of the vassals who had served the duke for years.

Alaine looked down at Adad in contempt. "Are you saying she went and betrothed herself to some mad sorcerer without any consultation? I wouldn't have expected you to permit such a rash mistake."

"Y-you abandoned an important duty..."

"Th-this is treason."

Alaine and Agveil immediately criticized Elisabeth's engagement. Instead of the planned assassination, the target was now returning with completely unknown reinforcements. They both wore twisted expressions on their faces. A minute ago, all they'd needed was a stroke

of good luck to secure Agveil's position as duke-in-waiting. Now they were probably feeling desperate.

"Well, the princess is very kind," intoned Juzell, dry. "It's pathetic, really. That Geo fellow was obviously deceived." The prime minister's mood was as dark as everyone else's. However, his approach was not to criticize Elisabel, but rather her "betroted."

The military faction, led by the prime minister, was in the process of finding Elisabel a suitor. Obviously, they planned to select a husband the duke was fond of. Whoever was chosen would then be first in the line of succession, a position now open after Balzard's death.

"Hmm..." An ordinary ruler would have been concerned about his family and subordinates. But the duke's eyes remained cold. In fact, a completely different matter had caught his attention. "Adad. Do you have anything else to report on Margilus's magic? What kind of power does he wield?"

"Huh? Ah, forgive me, my lord. As I reported before, he can summon dragons, control massive statues, and move faster than a horse. Other than that..." Adad repeated parts of his earlier report, ending with a frantic appeal that there was nothing else he could have done against "a magic user of such formidable power."

The duke looked away, seemingly disappointed. His gaze stopped on the fourth important figure in attendance. It was Nathan, the court sorcerer.

"Well, this all tracks with the information we've already gathered," the duke said to him. "What do you make of this?"

Nathan was not only a sorcerer, but also the head of intelligence, reporting directly to the duke. He had already gathered information regarding this "great wizard" who'd appeared in the Ryuse region, reporting all his findings to the duke.

"I cannot deny that there is a person named Geo Margilus who can wield transcendental magic. It is possible he has ancient magical charms in his possession. Considering the sheer breadth of his powers, he could be concealing a massive piece of maleithrilin or the branch of a sacred tree."

Nathan was a high sorcerer who'd studied in an official capacity at the Sorcerers' Guild in the north. He was trying to understand the logic underpinning the terrible power that this wizard was rumored to

harbor. The ancient divine kingdom, said to have prospered long before Shrendal, had left behind relics that contained far greater power than anything possible with modern sorcery. Furthermore, someone in possession of maleithrilin, which was sometimes known as a “battery for magic,” could exert power beyond his natural capacity.

“Pathetic,” spat Alaine. “It’s clearly some sort of deception. If he really does have ancient charms or a massive amount of maleithrilin, we just need to steal it away from him.”

“Rumor has it that dark elves live in his keep,” said Juzell. “He’s probably using them to help inflate his image. Perhaps the princess has fallen under some dubious spell of theirs.”

The duchess and the prime minister took turns denouncing Geo before the duke. One thing both factions could agree on was that Geo’s existence was nothing but an obstacle. In a way, their assessment of Geo was perfectly logical. Nathan merely shrugged his shoulders at their threatening attitudes.

Next, the duke turned his gaze to his black-haired, second-born son, who among all his children resembled him most. “Agveil. What say you?”

“E-errr...” Agveil fidgeted. He glanced between his father and mother, who both loomed before him, one seated, one standing. “H-honestly, I don’t think it’s a scam or an illusion. The information is too consistent. I don’t think the dwarves would be fooled so easily, and there are multiple witnesses...”

“Don’t be daft!” Alaine angrily scolded Agveil for sharing his relatively objective opinion, while glaring at Adad.

“S-sorry, Mother.” Agveil cowered, while the duke clicked his tongue.

“Well then. Let’s arrange a test for Geo Margilus, to see if he’s the real thing. Alaine, Juzell. Choose your strongest warriors. He can fight them.”

“Huh?! I mean...understood, my lord.”

“A-as you wish.”

The duke leaned on the armrest of the throne, a thin smile on his lips.

Meteorites, dragons, and giants? And he’s betrothed to my daughter? If

he really is everything he's cracked up to be, I'd trade every last man I've got to have him. The duke felt an ambition and an energy he'd long forgotten begin to spread through his body. He was eyeing the giant map of the continent that hung beyond the crowd. To be precise, he was looking farther east than Filsand, directly at his homeland of Velde.

As we reached the end of the Iron Fan mountain range and turned past a large boulder, we suddenly had a much broader view.

Below us lay a vast plain. But this plain was markedly less green than the flatlands around Ryuse. It seemed almost barren. As I used our break to muse about this, gazing out at the landscape, a shiny piece of paper fluttered down past my head.

"Hm? Oh, it's an Arcane Postcard."

The piece of paper that landed in my hand was the magical postcard I'd addressed to Sedam at Castle Getaeus a few days earlier. These cards were capable of making one full round-trip journey, including both the initial message and a reply. Sedam had probably made use of that feature.

"Wait, what...?" I read the contents. "'Two battles to eliminate bandits on the highway. Also, small groups of daemons appeared. The warriors and Calbanera Knights cooperated to defeat them. Suffered minor damages. Everything else is fine.'"

"So, the number of daemons is increasing again," Clara murmured as she read the postcard over my shoulder.

Lade looked at me in silence, while Reyha watched him, also silent. From his perspective, I was still potentially a daemonist, currently under investigation. I thought that I'd broken down some barriers with Lade at Axeholm, but now I realized that in order to truly make peace with him, I probably needed to be cleared of all charges.

Four days after departing Axeholm...

It was about the time of day when we needed to start setting up camp. According to Feivel and Elisabel, there was an open place suitable for camp just beyond the rocky stretch of road.

“My lord!” A black shadow dropped down before me. As usual, Reyha had gone ahead to scout the road. There was tension in her husky voice.

“What is it?”

“There are human warriors lurking ahead, more than thirty of them. It seems that they intend to attack when we start setting up camp.”

“What the hell? Are they bandits?”

“This group looks too skilled to be highwaymen. They are wearing strange, furred armor.”

“Th-they sound like Schultz warriors! But we haven’t reached their jurisdiction yet,” Elisabel cried out, clutching her silver staff. She had a pale look on her face.

The Schultz clan... They were the barbarians of Filsand, and currently had hostile relations with the duke of Filsand. Elisabel’s mother had been a Schultz princess.

Two and a half hours passed. Geo and his crew should have been arriving at the open space any minute now.

The left and right sides of the space had been eroded away over the ages. It was lined with long, thin, pillar-like stones, the product of long years of erosion. It was a natural wonder, a place that could rightly be described as a stone forest. The stones were all of various heights.

It was the perfect terrain for an ambush.

Hiding behind those stone pillars, keeping their breathing quiet, the Schultz warriors waited. Reyha had described them as wearing “furred armor,” but in reality, their gear was decorated with both fur and animal bones. Some were even wearing the fully intact skulls of wolves and bears.

The barbarian force numbered thirty-six strong. Their leader was a

petite warrior named Diane. She bore the official title of warmaster—supreme commander of the Schultz fighting forces.

“They will arrive here shortly, Lady Diane.”

“That’s ‘commander’ to you.”

“Y-yes. Sorry, Commander.” The middle-aged lieutenant, who sported wolf skull spaulders, slumped his shoulders in relief. “When we didn’t see her with the Filsand knights that passed by earlier, I was sure we’d be stuck camping out here forever. Darmund’s daughter...E-Eli—”

“It’s Elisabeth, all right. The daughter of the traitor, Shayla. She’s ours now.” Diane muttered her words darkly, a deep hatred in her voice as she lifted her chin. The movement revealed her short, silver hair and deep red eyes. She was only fifteen or sixteen years old.

And her face was almost completely identical to that of Elisabeth Roney Filsandia.

“Get ready. Especially your arrows. Shoot before you engage in melee.”

“Understood.”

In her role as the warmaster, Diane issued her commands in a gruff, masculine style. But the orders weren’t delivered in normal speech. The clan had its own special system of gestures and signals that sounded like insect calls, which she used to communicate the entire message.

The warriors were armed with short bows, spears, hand axes, and daggers. Perhaps since they typically expected to fight in confined spaces, such as forests or mountains, all their weapons were compact and simple. Diane’s sword stood apart as a piece of art, adorned with precious jewels. If there had been a sorcerer here, he would have perceived the powerful magic it harbored.

“Do you see them yet?” The voice coming from behind Diane belonged to a bald man. There was a strange tattoo on his face, and instead of body armor, he wore cloth and carried a wooden staff.

“Shut up and hide, adjutant.” Diane sounded irritated, but there

was fear in her voice as well. The term “adjutant” was used for the direct subordinate to the magemaster, the highest ranking practitioner of magic and divination in the Schultz clan. These conjurers wielded a magic power different from that of the sorcerers. They could stop an enemy’s heart just by staring at them, or possess their body with an evil spirit. They also exerted power over a wide variety of fields, including medical treatment and predicting the weather.

This single expert in divination was more valuable than the thirty best warriors led by Warmaster Diane, making this the strongest brigade in the Schultz clan.

“I apologize,” said the adjutant. “Do not hesitate to call upon me whenever I might be of use.” He looked up at her from where he crouched, an eerie smile upon his face. “I am always at your service.”

“I know.”

The presence of a conjurer in the Schultz clan made it nearly invincible. While the Schultz were called barbarians, in actuality they possessed a high level of knowledge inherited from the ancient, divine kingdom of the gods. Nevertheless, since the power of divination was superior to the knowledge they had in all other fields, the magemaster, leader of the conjurers, had more authority than even the patriarch of the clan.

“Chief...I have a bad feeling about this guy. What’s going on with the Holy Precincts, anyway...?” The lieutenant frowned as he whispered.

Diane was silent, but in her mind, she agreed with him completely.

“The women and children live in the Holy Precincts, and us warriors protect them from the fortress. I understand that much, but why can’t we go near the Holy Precincts? I haven’t seen my wife for two years now.”

“I know, calm down,” Diane consoled her lieutenant, who’d chosen now of all times to air his grievances.

The Schultz had built the Holy Precincts on the southern Hidal Plateau as a hidden refuge to protect their people from the Filsand military. The conjurers, including the magemaster, lived there with the women, children, and the elderly. In order to protect that realm, the warriors, led by Diane, were stationed in a separate fortress. Yet for the

past two years, all contact with the Holy Precincts had been restricted. Diane hadn't seen the patriarch and his wife—her own parents—in all that time.

“Right now, we need to concentrate on the task at hand. Once we capture Elisabel, I'm sure we'll get our chance.”

“Understood.”

The warriors were divided into three groups scattered throughout the square. The warmaster's strategy was for the adjutant to curse the enemy's main force as soon as they arrived and started building camp. Once the enemy was confused by the curse, the rest of the troops would bombard them with arrows.

Previously, Diane had been successful in attacking the Filsand military with such tactics, even capturing Prince Balzard.

The warriors were standing by, arrows nocked, ready to start the attack. According to their scout's report, Elisabel and the rest of the group would be arriving any minute now.

However, the lady and her entourage never appeared.

“Is it possible...they noticed us?”

“Warmaster...Doma's and Catera's teams aren't responding,” the lieutenant whispered to Diane, urgency in his voice. Diane's team had separated from the main unit to surround the square.

“What the hell?” Diane squinted her red eyes, staring hard at the stone forest where the other teams were supposed to be hiding. Precisely because they were hiding, they wouldn't have been visible no matter how hard she looked, but even their insect-call signals had stopped.

“Ah!” She suddenly noticed something. One of the Schultz warriors who'd been hiding behind a stone pillar was lying face-down, crumpled up on the ground. He hadn't been hit by an arrow, and it didn't look like he was having a seizure. It was as if he had fallen asleep standing up, out of pure exhaustion.

“Huh...? Could it be?!” Diane turned back to look at her subordinates, but she was swiftly rendered speechless. Right before her eyes, ten warriors fell down almost at the same time, as if caught in some quagmire.

“Huh?! ”

“No way...” As far as she could see, only her lieutenant and the adjutant were still standing.

What she'd moments ago considered to be a hidden, undefeatable battle formation had suddenly transformed into a death trap in enemy territory. Diane drew her blade, spine tingling. Her divine sword had been passed down to her as a family heirloom from the patriarch of the Schultz clan. Its glowing, rainbow-tinted blade illuminated the three remaining warriors.

“Hey, get it together!” Her lieutenant shook the shoulders of a warrior draped over a chest-high rock. The warrior didn't respond. He slowly slipped off the stone, flipping over onto his back before slumping to the ground. For a minute, they thought he'd taken his last breath when...

“Nnngh...”

“Is he...sleeping?!”

“Is it a spell? But all of them all at once...?”

His eyes were closed tightly, and he was sleeping so deeply that he wasn't snoring. Even the impact of falling onto the ground hadn't disturbed his slumber.

The lieutenant shook the shoulders of the sleeping warrior again. “Hey! You're on duty!”

“Hmm... Ahhh...?”

“Good, he's awake. What the hell happened?!” the lieutenant demanded.

“Huh? What?” The warrior looked around groggily, rubbing his eyes.

The lieutenant was relieved that the slumber was light enough that the warrior could still be awakened, but the groggy warrior would clearly be useless for a while.

Just then, a girl's sharp voice echoed behind him. “Idiot! This is obviously an assault by the enemy! Get it together and search for the attackers!”

“R-right!”

“Argh...”

The girl was the warmaster. The lieutenant and adjutant snapped

to attention at her orders.

The lieutenant was a skilled warrior, and the adjutant was the second-greatest conjurer in the entire Schultz clan. As long as they knew the position of the enemy, there was no way they could lose. Irritated, Diane stood with her back to a stone pillar and surveyed the perimeter.

But then...

“Agh...!” The young girl suddenly felt a powerful dizziness come over her, and she staggered off to one side. It was a fast-working and intense drowsiness, rapidly swallowing up her consciousness. The fatigue continued to grow stronger, even after she hit her body against a pillar. Just before she collapsed on the ground, the girl cried out, “Yah!” Sparks flared from her divine sword.

The moment the first spark touched her, the heat on her skin rushed up to her brain and blew away the curse of fatigue.

“D-damn it!” Diane used the shimmering, sparking sword as a kind of staff, holding herself up with its point stuck into the earth. All the abnormal tiredness swiftly vanished, leaving her clear-eyed and alert.

“Everyone...” she started. But the sight that greeted her was the lieutenant, adjutant, and reawakened soldier all passed out on the ground. Everyone but her had already been defeated.

Diane was terrified. She’d never experienced a fear like this, even when fighting the heavily armored Filsand knights. Not even the dangerous monsters who guarded the Twisted Wood frightened her to this degree. She had no idea what the true form of these enemies was, how many there were, where they were, or what they were doing to her. She didn’t even have the wherewithal to think of a simple plan, like kicking the sleeping warriors awake.

Dammit! Get it together! You are the warmaster of the Schultz clan! Losing is not an option! Diane clenched her teeth. Just then, she heard the voice of a man that didn’t have an ounce of tension in it.

“What? She resisted it?”

The voice was coming from up above.

Chapter 3

DIANE'S RED EYES opened wide in amazement.

Needless to say, it was Geo Margilus who floated in the air above her.

"Wha?!" She'd never heard of magic that allowed humans to fly in the sky. Of course, she'd also believed it impossible to make thirty warriors fall asleep at once.

"Are you a sorcerer? Are you Elisabeth's bodyguard?"

"Ahhh...well, something like that..." Geo scratched his jaw as he answered Diane, who leveled the tip of her shining, rainbow-hued sword toward him.

So, he could speak. Just that small piece of information put some of Diane's fears to rest. It also helped that she didn't sense any murderous desires in Geo's expression.

In fact, after getting news of the ambush from Reyha, Geo had done everything in his power to make sure that the Schultz clan was disarmed without doing them any harm. He flew up using the *Fly* spell, then hid himself with *Invisibility*, and knocked them all out using *Sleep*. It would have been easy to slay the whole warband with attack spells, but he wanted to avoid loss of life, even if it took some extra effort.

Actually, his first plan had been to use *Move Outer Plane* to sneak around them, but he rejected that idea, figuring that some other innocent Filsand travelers or merchants might accidentally find themselves in the line of fire.

"I see," Diane said. "So that means..."

"I'm sorry I took the first shot, but you *were* planning on ambushing us, right? If possible, I'd like to discuss—"

Naturally, Geo's attempts at sweet-talking were pointless. Diane's anger flared up, blowing away all her fears. "Piss off!"

Diane took aim at the man flying above her head and stomped the ground. The stone pillars in Geo's vicinity suddenly began to lift up at an incredible speed. The young warmaster, who stood on top of one of

the rapidly rising pillars, kicked off her perch and flew even higher.

“Huh?! Whooooa!” Geo never would have expected something like this. He screamed like an idiot.

With absolutely no hesitation, the young girl aimed her divine blade at his abdomen, thrusting it forward in a mighty, flying lunge. But...

“What the hell?!”

Just before the sword would have pierced Geo’s stomach, it was stopped by something invisible. Diane felt like her hands were stuck between two pieces of hard meat. It was the work of an Invisible Demon, summoned by Geo and ordered to protect him from attacks.

“Ergh...! Damn it!” With her lunge deflected, Diane fell to the ground. She should have broken at least a bone or two, but like a cat, the girl deftly absorbed the impact and stood right up. Her red eyes hadn’t lost an ounce of their will to fight.

“J-just calm down for a second...”

“Shut up! I’ll kill you!” Diane ripped her dagger out of its sheath, preparing for her second attack.

“Such insolence!” This time, a dark brown shadow attacked Diane.

“Huh?!”

It was Reyha, ever ready to jump in and protect her master. The dark elf’s swift kick to Diane’s head...missed. Barely. Once again, the girl reacted with superhuman ability, thanks to her divine sword’s power.

“It’s a friggin’ dark elf?!” Diane dodged out of the way, using the momentum to carry her divine sword all the way around into a sweeping, circular counterattack. Her outstanding sense for battle was proof that her title as warmaster was no hollow honor. But then...

“Huh?!”

Reyha’s long, lean body had already vanished from the path of the sword, the blade leaving a rainbow trail through empty air. As soon as the elf’s foot came back from her kick to touch the ground, she swiftly flattened her entire body against the earth, nimble as a spider. She was so flexible, it was like she had no joints at all.

Diane snarled. “Ah! Argh!”

Reyha took a quick breath and jumped. She soared off the ground, high into the sky. Her kick hurtled nearly straight down—and knocked the divine sword right out of Diane’s grip.

“Damn it!” Diane gave up on her right hand, which was numb from impact, and instead nimbly hefted her dagger in her left hand. She was undoubtedly an extraordinary warrior. But in this world, an extraordinary warrior was still merely average in the face of Reyha’s truly unnatural ability.

“Reyha!” Geo called out. “Take it easy!”

“Urgh?!”

Reyha had her legs wrapped around the girl’s neck like a two-headed snake. She’d twisted her body and was slamming Diane’s head toward the ground. If Geo’s frantic cry had come even one second later, her head would have hit the sharp corner of a rock sticking out of the earth.

“Hey, hey. Is the girl okay...?”

“My lord, I beg your forgiveness for my delayed arrival! Please, punish your unworthy servant for her unforgiveable lapse!” Reyha stood in front of Geo with genuine worry on her face. Arriving late to the battle, seeing Geo suffer an attack—to her, it was a profound failure.

The whole thing weirded Geo out. From where he sat, he could see her eyes glistening with tears, to say nothing of her peculiar request for punishment. “Calm down. That won’t be necessary. Right now, I need your help.”

Reyha remained obstinate. “Unacceptable! This is an unforgivable blunder! I am the Si of the great Orly, he who is the Lord of Flow. I am held to a higher standard! You need but name the punishment, and I will abide by your orders, be it whipping or stoning or whatsoever you desire!”

“I said no!” Geo rubbed at his forehead, exasperated. “Pick up this child. I’ll call the others. Make sure the rest of her clan doesn’t wake.”

“A-as my lord wills...”

Geo left Reyha behind, flying swiftly above the pillars. She looked oddly disappointed for some reason.

We arrived in the square to set up camp a little later than expected.

Thanks to Reyha's scouting, we were able to prevent the Schultz clan's ambush.

"Margilus!" Ted called. "We've got everyone tied and rounded up!"

"These barbarians must have a death wish if they're willing to attack Lord Margilus," said one of his subordinates.

I'd asked Ted and the dwarves to bind the Schultz warriors, still sound asleep, thanks to the power of *Sleep*. The others had started setting up camp, and I decided to parlay with the young girl, like the leader I was supposed to be.

I looked at her for a few moments. "She really does look exactly like you, Elisabel."

"Yes. She's probably the daughter of Cher, my mother Shayla's older sister."

We stood in front of the girl, still unconscious after Reyha's strikes. Except for her light brown skin and silver hair, she could have easily passed for Elisabel.

Clara joined us. "Elisabel, your mother was the daughter of the Schultz patriarch, right? So that means..."

"Yes. My aunt Cher was a Schultz princess. After the clan fled south, she was supposed to be the wife of the new patriarch."

"In other words," said Ild, "this girl is the daughter of the current patriarch and your cousin?"

Reyha loomed nearby, watching the girl with the utmost caution and vigilance.

"So, let's see," I said. "The Schultz clan and the daughter of their patriarch were posted here, far away from their home in the south, waiting to ambush us. They must have been after Elisabel."

"It's hard to think of another reason," Elisabel murmured. "But if they knew that I was in Axeholm, then they must have gotten their information from Filsand..."

The first thing this girl had said when she saw me was Elisabeth's name. All we could do was wake her up and see if she'd talk to us.

Reyha lifted the girl up to a seated position and shook her a little.

"Urgh..." The girl opened her eyes—eyes that looked identical to Elisabeth's, down to their specific shade of red. We'd taken her shining sword, which according to Clara harbored a terrifying amount of magic, along with her other weapons, but other than that she wasn't restrained.

"I... Ah?! You?! *You!*" The girl, still not completely lucid, jumped up as soon as she saw me.

"Hold on." Reyha grabbed the nape of her neck to keep her in place.

Diane hissed. "Rrrgh!"

"Whoa, just calm down for a second," I told her.

"You bastard," Diane snarled. "Mrgh!"

We waited for a few moments. Once the girl finally realized that she couldn't get away from Reyha, no matter how she struggled, she looked ready to talk.

She plopped down on the ground with a thump and crossed her legs. Although she looked like a distinguished warrior, as an older man, I couldn't help but say one thing. "Now see here, little lady. Is that any way for a girl of your age to act?" I hadn't initially planned to scold her, but she reacted to my words exactly as I would've expected.

"Shut up, old man!" There was no reason that such a young girl and I would see eye to eye in the first place.

Reyha tightened her grip on the girl's neck. "The next time you speak like that to our lord, I'll rip out your tongue. You hear me, girl?"

"Ergh!"

"The lord is not an *old man*...even if he is slightly more aged than the clan might find ideal."

"Enough!" I yelled. Right now, I needed her to calm down so we could talk.



“I’m Diane. Warmaster of the Schultz clan.”

“Yes, she clearly is some manner of war leader,” Elisabeth commented, upon hearing Diane’s rather absurd title.

Diane all but shrieked in response. “Elisabel, daughter of the traitor, Shayla! You’ll never be forgiven!”

“Traitor? My mother was kidnapped! And then forced to—she did not wed the duke of Filsand of her own free will!”

“Forced, you say? If it were me, I’d bite out Darmund’s windpipe, shred it into tiny pieces, and kill myself before he could impregnate me with a wretch like you. If she couldn’t even do that, then it’s because she betrayed her people for the sake of a comfortable, decadent life.”

There was silence. Elisabeth bit her tongue, glaring at Diane, and said no more.

Her mother Shayla had indeed been forced into marriage with the duke of Filsand, but after she’d given birth to Elisabeth, she’d lived a comfortable life. From the perspective of the Schultz clan, who’d been driven from their lands to live in poverty, it was only natural they would call her a traitor. Furthermore, Elisabeth had the empathy to sense those feelings in others.

“It seems that your objective was to capture Elisabeth,” I pressed. “Why?”

“Well, personally, I wanted to kill her. But we’re here on the orders of the magemaster. I have no idea what his plans are.” Even ignoring how rude she was, Diane’s answers were awfully honest and straightforward. Apparently, Reyha had scared her... Or maybe she was showing us respect?

“And who is the magemaster?” Elisabeth demanded. “The orders weren’t from the patriarch?”

“The magemaster is the magemaster. Even the patriarch doesn’t argue with him.”

“Does that mean...” Judging from their exchange, this magemaster was some kind of authority in matters of magic. What’s more, that power might have allowed him to dominate all sorts of other

matters as well. It might not be considerate to say so, but that kind of might-makes-right hierarchy was exactly what I'd expect from barbarians.

"Well, I'm very sorry, but we can't give you Elisabel," I said. "We're happy to let you all go, so please go back quietly to your... fortress, was it?"

In this land, Diane and her team were rebels. If we released them on the spot and they attacked a Filsand village or caravan or something, I'd feel pretty guilty about it, to say nothing of any possible harm to my reputation. But Diane spat contemptuously on the ground at my suggestion.

"Don't be a fool! Even if I promise to go home, I can't speak for the adjutant. If he's in a bad mood, he might just curse and kill us all. I won't be able to stop the warriors, either."

"Adjutant?" I wasn't familiar with this term. Of course, I knew what the *word* meant, but I sensed a special meaning here. As I tilted my head to one side in thought, things suddenly grew dark.

"She's talking about this guy." There was a wall next to me—or rather, Lade's enormous bulk, casting a correspondingly enormous shadow.

"Urph!"

Lade threw a bald, middle-aged man to the ground next to Diane. I'd seen him standing alongside her earlier, when I put everyone to sleep. He was easy to remember, since the tattoos on his face made him look like some kind of out-of-place punk rocker.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" the man quickly stood up, screaming. "What is this?!" Unlike Diane, the top half of his body was restrained, tied with a rope.

"Is this your 'adjutant'? Even you, the warmaster, must do what he says?"

"More or less."

Personally, I couldn't see any sense of respect in Diane's eyes for this man.

"We are the proud clan of Schultz, descendants of the ancient divine kingdom. I am the adjutant to the magemaster! He who controls the mightiest powers of conjury! Untie this rope at once and hand over

that girl! Hand over the daughter of General Darmund!” The middle-aged man included a clear self-introduction in his hollering. It seemed that the term “adjutant” meant that he was an aide to the magemaster. That meant that it was more important to persuade him than it was Diane.

“Wait a second,” Clara snarked, looking over at Lade. “Why did you suddenly decide to help us? Normally, you won’t do anything.” She had a point. I found it a bit strange myself.

“I wasn’t helping,” Lade grated. “I just found a daemonist.”

“Huh?!”

Lade’s reply surprised everyone.

“M-me? A daemonist? Preposterous! I am a proud conjuror! The insolence!” The so-called adjutant ranted at us in a screaming rage.

Next to him, Diane stared in wide-eyed silence. She started to slowly scoot away. Apparently, she hadn’t trusted this adjutant much to begin with.

“I am from the warrior clan,” Lade intoned. “I can always sniff out a daemonist.”

“Th-the warrior clan?!” The adjutant snarled. “You dirty, ignorant hunter!”

Diane blinked. “*That* clan...? This guy?”

The warrior clan were a nomadic people destined to hunt daemons and daemonists. The Schultz seemed to know them by name. Both the worried expression on the adjutant’s face and the fear in Diane’s eyes held weight, if in subtly different ways.

“You would talk of *smell*? What you mean is you’re merely guessing. You can’t judge someone based on looks alone. Don’t you need to carry out one of your ‘examinations’?”

I had once undergone an examination by the warrior clan myself. In fact, we were technically still waiting for a judgment. The procedure consisted of using a tool called the “Daemon’s Sight,” a vessel containing daemon blood, and making a judgment based on the

reaction of the fluid contained within. As someone who'd suffered the cloud of suspicion that came with an accusation of daemonism, I couldn't help but feel a little bit of sympathy for the adjutant.

"There's no need for us to convene a formal tribunal," Lade said, holding a tool that resembled a crystal ball in his hand. There was a red-and-black lump of daemon blood enclosed in the middle of the sphere. To conduct the examination, the adjutant needed only to touch the surface of the ball, and we would look at the reaction of the blood inside.

"I don't like it, but he is an expert," said Clara. "We should probably perform the examination, just in case." She wore a complicated expression on her face. I felt certain she was recalling the commotion that had transpired when the warrior clan suddenly showed up at Castle Getaeus.

"Yeah..." I nodded, but I wasn't ready for what the adjutant would do next.

"M-Margilus?! Is it really you, Lord?! Are you truly Geo Margilus?!" His distorted expression suddenly turned outright daemonic as he pressed me with questions. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't introduced myself, so what was he going on about?

"W-well, yes, but..."

"Then *die!*" The bald man glared at me with eyes opened so wide they looked like perfect circles. I could see a sinister flame flickering in their depths.

"He's conjuring!" Clara stood steadfast in front of me.

"Adjutant!" Diane called out. "Stop this at once!"

What kind of attack was he attempting? My body went tense. Specifically, I felt a thump against the left side of my chest. It was light, like getting punched with a baby's fist. "What was that?"

"Why didn't that kill you?! Your heart is supposed to stop! M-my Evil Eye...it didn't work?!"

Diane was aghast. "Y-you really tried to kill him?"

Both the trembling, bound adjutant and Diane were dumbstruck. Was his "Evil Eye" that thump I'd felt?

In previous experiments, I'd found that the magic of this world

was considered a physical attack by most of my own spells. My wizardry couldn't normally protect against sorcery. I didn't really understand, but the inherent resistance of my body as a Level 36 wizard must have won out against his magical strike.

"Hyaaaaagh!" The adjutant's mouth opened so wide I thought it would tear. His cry was fraught with so much hatred that it sent chills down my spine. His eyes turned yellow and clouded over. I remembered the daemonists of Relis City. Lade had been right.

"You monster!" Reyha wrapped her arms around the still-screaming adjutant's neck, trying to hold him down, but...

"Graaagh!" The bald man's neck stretched like the body of a snake. His mouth, open to its limit, was now lined with sharp fangs. His long neck recoiled like a loaded spring, completely unaffected by Reyha's grip.

He turned toward me. "Geo!"

"Eeek!" Clara and Elisabel both screamed.

"Whoa." I never would have imagined this. I desperately wanted to protect Clara, standing before me, but I couldn't think to do anything except push her out of the way.

The monstrous, snake-like head of the adjutant stopped just short of eating my face. That was thanks to the sudden sweep of Lade's hand, striking like a falcon from the side.

Flustered, I took that opportunity to retreat with the women. Ild was also backing up, but he kept his eyes on the threat, shuffling one step at a time.

"Hmph." Lade snorted, as if the whole thing was only a slight irritation. Clad in his strange armor, clenching the head of the adjutant within his fist, he looked like nothing less than an angry god.

"Gyaaaaaah!"

Squish.

Lade crushed the adjutant's head in one hand. It was the most grotesque sound I'd ever heard, in this world or my own. If I hadn't stepped back, I would have been covered with the bodily fluids that escaped his remains.

"Man...thanks," I said to Lade. "You really saved me."

“That was awfully impressive,” Clara agreed.

Lade didn’t reply. He just nodded, expressionless. He casually tossed the remains of the adjutant aside.

“Lord, this means...” Reyha looked understandably ill.

“T-to think that humans can become such monstrosities...” Elisabel and the others seemed to be fighting nausea.

“Master Margilus! Are you all right?” Ted and his team, previously busy preparing the camp, had noticed the commotion and started gathering around.

“Well...” *So, even daemonists are involved in the Filsand and Schultz clan dispute. This is going to be even more of a pain than I thought.* I rubbed my brow with my fingers. “First, let’s do something about the poor girl. Then, let’s restart the discussions.”

Diane, daughter of the barbarian clan’s patriarch, had screamed bloody murder and then fainted after seeing a fellow clan member get his head crushed right in front of her eyes. Where she lay upon the ground, she was speckled with his remains.

The camp was finally set up for the night.

I resumed my discussions with Diane, joined by Ild, Clara, Elisabel, and Lade. I had the dwarves eat a short distance away. The Schultz warriors had all regained consciousness. I wasn’t happy about it, but I left them tied up. Ted was keeping an eye on them with his team. From their group, we’d only brought the lieutenant to join our discussions. He seemed to have an idea of what was going on.

“What exactly was the nature of that adjutant’s transformation?” I wondered. “Can conjurers do such things?”

“Of course not.” Diane, who had finally cleaned up with the help of Reyha, was no longer trying to fight. It seemed that both she and the other Schultz warriors recognized daemons and daemonists as mutual, natural enemies.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.” The lieutenant nodded in agreement with her.

“He was leeched,” Lade explained, in his typically dispassionate style. “I’ve seen it before. That’s what happens when daemonic influence grows especially strong in a daemonist.”

There are daemonists like that...?

“H-has the Schultz clan started worshipping the daemons, too?!” Elisabel asked.

“No! We are protecting the divine spirits of our ancestors! Not playing around with daemons!” Diane adamantly denied Elisabel’s accusation. Judging by the way the lieutenant trembled at her side, I believed her.

“But, you did say that the Schultz clan’s main residence is in the Holy Precincts, and that some of your warriors dwell apart in the fortress, right? What are the Holy Precincts like?”

“Th-the thing is...we don’t really know much about the Holy Precincts,” Diane admitted. “Those of us at the fortress are told not to intrude on their territory, and when we get our orders, the magemaster sends one of his lackeys.”

According to Diane’s continued testimony, there was absolutely no sign of daemonists on the front lines or in the fortress. On the other hand, she didn’t have any idea what was going on in the Holy Precincts where most of her people resided. We learned that she hadn’t been allowed to enter the Holy Precincts for the past two years, not since she had been presented with her divine sword and named warmaster.

Forget about the daemons for a minute. I feel sorry to see a girl kept away from her family for so long...

“Hmph. So, to put it simply, the magemaster and company are daemonists and are up to no good in the Holy Precincts?” I crossed my arms. To sum up what Diane and the lieutenant had told us, over the past two years or so, the magemaster had suddenly become aggressive, as if he was a completely different person, and started a plot to instigate revenge on General Darmund (better known as the duke of Filsand). He had also sent spies to Filsand and given Diane and the other warriors orders based on their information.

“Worst-case scenario, there’s a possibility that the entire Schultz settlement has been taken over by daemon worship,” Clara remarked calmly.

“D-don’t be ridiculous! My father...and my mother would never worship daemons!” Diane’s face turned red.

“Urrrgh,” I grated. The entire thing made me groan. *Either way, as a wizard, I can’t just leave the daemonists alone. But the whole reason we’re here in the first place is to bring Elisabel home to the duke of Filsand to negotiate trade and broaden the anti-daemon alliance, all after ensuring her safety.*

“Get out that magical horse of yours. I’ll check out these Holy Precincts.” It was Lade who interrupted my thoughts with his request.

The next morning...

“Hey, just what do you expect us to do, old man?! Er, I mean, Margilus!” I’d set Diane and her Schultz warriors free. I’d also returned their weapons, including her divine sword.

This was because when Lade of the warrior clan had said he would investigate the daemon worship situation in the Holy Precincts, Diane had offered to help. The lieutenant and other warriors weren’t really sure about everything that was going on, but for the time being, they obeyed their warmaster, and gave up on capturing Elisabel.

“You want to get back to the Holy Precincts as soon as possible, right? So focus on that. Hold off a little longer for Elisabel.” After Diane gave us her reply, I took a look at the people who I’d soon be parting ways with.

I’d decided to trust Lade and Reyha with searching for the daemonists in the Holy Precincts.

Lade was silent. Truthfully, he intended to go no matter what I said.

“Lord, please don’t worry. I, Reyhanalka Haiklus Si, promise to prove my worth.” Reyha was clearly going as a service to me.

“But you know, I’m worried,” I told her. “Please be careful. Don’t

do anything crazy. Even if someone who looks exactly like me tries to talk to you, or if you see one of your old friends, never let your guard down. If you suspect any danger, hop right on the phantom horse and come back, you hear?”

“I understand. Your concern touches me, my lord.”

I cast every protection spell that I’d charged on Reyha and gave her several magic items. I also gave her one Arcane Postcard, in case she needed to communicate with me. The only other thing I could do was trust them.

“I’m counting on you, Reyha. Or rather... I, Geo Margilus the wizard, formally entrust you with this duty as my Si.”

“My lord...these words please me very much.”

I turned away from the emotional Reyha to Lade, standing beside her.

“Meanwhile, I’ve never had to worry about you for a second. Don’t go too crazy and cause trouble for Reyha or the Schultz warriors.”

“Mind your own business,” he replied.

“You guys remember how to get back to the Holy Precincts, right? Now, concentrate on visualizing the route within your mind.”

“Huh?”

I gathered the thirty Schultz warriors, Lade, and Reyha all in one spot. There was also a black horse surrounded by a pale aura. The “magical horse” that Lade had mentioned was my phantom horse. (Incidentally, I combined the spell with *Infinity*, so the horse would be usable for seven days.) I invoked my next spell while targeting everyone gathered nearby.

“Open, Gate of Magic.”

Those were the first magic words I’d ever spoken in this world. My imagined self passed under the thick, black Gate of Magic created in the inner world of my consciousness and then descended its spiral staircase.

I stopped on the sixth level and entered the spellbook archive. I then selected one of the nine bookrests lined up in a row. The title of the book I'd chosen was *Forced March*.

"As a consequence of this spell, any army that obeys me shall be granted swift and sound legs, more vigor than flame, and travel at triple their normal speed. The spell shall last until reaching the final destination of the Schultz Holy Precincts."

As both my real and imagined selves chanted the spell, the book turned into two ten-sided dice, one black and the other white. These are often known as percentage dice in tabletop RPGs. The white die represented the tens place and the black die represented the ones place. I rolled them together to get a random number between one and one hundred. If they both landed on zero here (which technically represented one hundred, not zero), then I would fail in casting the spell.

I'm sure Diane will have some words for me if I fail. Please let this work...

Just in case, I had prepared two instances of *Forced March* this morning. Even so, I didn't want to fail at spells unnecessarily, so I silently prayed as I tossed the dice onto the bookrest. They clattered around, making a sound I'd now grown accustomed to...

"It worked. *Forced March*!"

I'd rolled a 52. So, in short, there was a 1 in 100 chance that I would fail at casting any spell. This time, my spell was successful. The two dice turned into chaotic energy and shot upward, out into the real world.

"Hey, what are you mumbling about?!"

Just as I finished the chanting, I could see the chaotic energy envelop the Schultz clan, Reyha, and Lade, rippling through the space around their bodies. They probably felt unbelievably energized.

"Wh-what the hell," Diane gasped.

"Holy mackerel," one of the warriors said. "This power... It's amazing!"

"I feel like I could walk to the ends of the world. Reaching the Holy Precincts will be a cinch!"

I allowed myself to feel a little satisfaction. "With my magic,

you'll be able to walk at triple your normal speed from now until the time you arrive at the Holy Precincts. It would take you about twelve days, normally, isn't that right? So in this case, you should be able to arrive within about four days."

"A-are you serious...?"

"Oh, but be careful. If you have to break ranks for something like a battle, the effects of the spell will be cut off. And once you arrive at your destination, you'll feel severe exhaustion for half a day. Make sure you get enough rest before taking any action." By the time I finished explaining, the attitude of Diane and the Schultz warriors toward me had changed quite a bit.

"Old m—Margilus? Just...what the hell are you?" Diane asked me.

"The lord of Castle Getaeus, a wizard, and an ally to all those who fight against daemons."

Hey. I think I just pulled off the dignified look for once.

"Ms. Diane," Elisabeth started.

"Elisabeth! Remember this: You're just getting a temporary reprieve! Someday, I'll take down that Darmund asshole and get Filsand back! Be ready for it!"

Elisabeth's expression was complicated. Unfortunately, there had been no progress in lessening the hatred and hostility between these two.

I'm pretty sure Elisabeth wasn't expecting a happy family reunion right off the bat, anyway. I let out a gentle sigh.

"I will not be ready," said Elisabeth.

Diane gaped. "You what?!"

"Even if I were to prepare myself, I have nothing left to protect. At the very least, I want *you* to protect that."

Diane was silent for a moment. "I have no idea what you're talking about, but I'll keep that in mind."

Perhaps being bound by blood meant that they understood each other in some way? I didn't really get it. One thing I did know was that Elisabeth's words were depressing again. The two girls were complete opposites, but it seemed to me like Diane's principles kept her more grounded than Elisabeth's.

“Let’s get going,” Diane shouted. “To the Holy Precincts!”

“Await my return, my lord,” said Reyha.

Lade was silent.

I watched as the Schultz warriors and my two friends headed south. Thanks to the effects of *Forced March*, they were making good time already. I watched until their shadows disappeared into the distance, and then turned to the allies who were still with me.

“Let’s go. Filsand awaits.”

Chapter 4

THREE DAYS had passed since our surprise encounter with the Schultz warriors, and since Lade and Reyha had set off on their own separate route. I wondered if they had reached the Holy Precincts by now.

Our path had grown significantly wider. We were already past the Iron Fan mountain range and had moved away from the Twilight Wastelands. The sun was getting hotter. It really was true that climates can be completely different on opposite sides of a mountain. Since yesterday, we'd been walking along the Zesun River, which runs north to south down the middle of the Filsand territory, and I was grateful for the cool air.

I was feeling a bit helpless without Reyha, who always patrolled to make sure things were safe. Not to mention Lade, who was strong enough to take on a thousand men. But thanks to Ted, Clara, and the dwarves all working double-time, we somehow made it through unscathed. Even when we were attacked by a skeleton while stopping for the night, the three recruits standing watch did their job and fought it off without further incident. I didn't even have to use any of the spells that I'd specifically prepared for encounters with the undead.

If everything continued to go according to plan, we would be able to sleep in beds tonight for the first time in a while.

"Hey, I see it! It's Bruno Village," Elisabeth cried happily from her perch on the wagon. I squinted my eyes and saw a large village waiting up ahead.

As we got closer, we could see the details of the village more clearly.

Bruno Village was surrounded and protected by high mud walls and empty moats. It looked more like an earthwork fortress than a village, with a large mechanical bow installed on a lookout perch

above.

“Bruno Village is actually on the northern border of Filsand,” Elisabel explained. “Of course, most of the enemies they fight here are the undead...” She spoke exactly how the daughter of the ruler should, and her explanation was accurate. But something about it felt off.

“What do we have here?” Clara frowned. She was sitting next to Elisabel atop the wagon. I wanted to know, too.

On either side of the road approaching Bruno—milling around the outskirts of the village—were countless people. They’d pitched makeshift tents and shelters, but it seemed they’d been living here for quite a long time. Judging by their appearance, and the state of their belongings, these people were impoverished.

“These are refugees.” Elisabel stuck to the technically accurate, official explanation, a dark expression on her face.

The village housed not only villagers, but soldiers as well. Elisabel explained the situation further as we headed toward the residence of the Filsand military governor.

“This region is the northernmost foothold of the Velde Kingdom.”

In other words, there was no available land beyond here. To the west stood the Iron Fan mountain range; to the north were the Twilight Wastelands; to the south was the Twisted Wood. None of them were suitable for homes. Furthermore, even nearing the border of the Twilight Wastelands meant risking attacks from the undead.

“The capital of Filsand has grown. It’s thanks to our maritime trade. But that has caused the population to expand beyond the capacity of the land. It’s not just because of natural population growth—people from various countries who lost their homes have gathered here.”

“I heard that even in the Ryuse area, the population has increased due to the lack of daemon outbreaks. Apparently, it’s resulted in food shortages.”

No matter how great a wizard I was, overpopulation was a problem that I was unable to tackle.

“Is it possible that the duke of Filsand’s fighting with the Schultz clan may be part of the cause?” Ild asked Elisabel, a serious look on his face.

The daughter of the duke nodded gravely. “Economically, that’s

exactly right. The Hidal Plateau where the Schultz clan lives is not a fruitful land...though it's better than nothing."

"Too much prosperity for the people of Filsand, hmm? A good problem to have. So, that means that the duke is working to fulfill his duty as a ruler." Clara sounded somewhat impressed, but this time the daughter of the duke shook her head.

"My father doesn't have any such intentions. He only does things for his own personal benefit."

The meeting with the commander of the soldiers governing Bruno Village went about as well as could be expected.

At the very least, as the apparent fiancé to the princess, I couldn't very well pass through without paying my respects. Anyway, I wasn't here on holiday. I'd come to negotiate as the lord of Castle Getaeus. I introduced myself to the commander and was able to rent out all (or I should say both) of the rooms in the nicest inn in the village without any problems.

Understandably, my companions, especially Clara, were not in particularly good moods.

"Unbelievable! That commander! He clearly just despises Margilus!" Clara flopped down on the sofa in the guest room with such force I thought she'd punch a hole in it.

"Yeah...he did ask how Elisabel and I got to know each other..."

"Despicable!" Even Ild sounded irritated.

"It's infuriating." Ted and the new recruits were also complaining. Even the dwarves seemed on the verge of a rampage.

To make a long story short, the commander and soldiers had treated me like a lecherous middle-aged man who'd made advances on a young girl, all to weasel my way into a position as son-in-law of the duke. I was starting to feel glad that Reyha wasn't with us—for the sake of the commander, of course.

"Ah, umm... I'm very sorry, everyone. Lord Margilus, it's my fault..." Elisabel lowered her eyes and apologized, looking completely

dejected. It wasn't really her fault...well, maybe it was. But anyway, I wasn't dumb enough to blame her. Besides, it was nothing compared to the abuse I'd suffered from my colleagues back when I was working full-time in an office.

"This is really no big deal. I'm the one who agreed to this engagement strategy as your ally. Don't even worry about it."

"Thank you very much," Elisabeth said softly. "Are all wizards as nice as you, Lord Margilus?"

"Huh? Well, uh, I suppose..."

"Oh, shut up," Clara griped good-naturedly. "There is a such thing as *too* nice, you know. Could you please consider all the distress I put myself through getting angry on your behalf? You're going to give me wrinkles between my eyebrows." It seemed she was feeling a little better after the exchange between Elisabeth and me. She was laughing when she mentioned her "distress."

I found myself smiling. "Now that *is* a real problem. I at least can afford to get a few more wrinkles. I'll try and get a little bit angry myself, next time."

"Oi, Sacco, ye hear that? Don't mess up the next grub shift! They'll turn ya into a hog!"

"Ugh!"

"Hah hah! When you turn into a pig, Sacco, make sure it's a delicious one!"

"Wah ha ha!"

Ted and the recruits did their best to liven the atmosphere. Feivel and the dwarves were cracking up along with them, and soon, everyone else had joined in on the fun.

There was a riverboat route from Bruno Village to Filsand. There were no passenger ships, but our group was traveling with the daughter of the duke and her fiancé. We were able to charter a top quality boat through the same commander that everyone had been complaining about.

We were even able to load the dwarf wagon on board. Despite the ship's heavy load, it sailed smoothly down the river.

"It's possible that my father isn't even thinking about my brother Agveil or me," Elisabel suddenly murmured, leaning on the side of the boat, her pigtails fluttering in the river breeze.

"Is that so?"

"The only thing on my father's mind right now, Lord Margilus, is you."

"Me? Does he want to trade?"

"That's probably one reason..." Elisabel shook her head, chuckling a little. "It's your terrifying 'wizardry,' Lord Margilus. I am sure that he will do anything to get ahold of it." There was confidence in Elisabel's voice.

"Hmmm..." I had never tried to hide my existence or identity in Relis City or Axeholm. It was natural to think that the duke would have at least heard rumors about me. Most importantly, Adad and the other Filsand knights had gone back home before us and would have told them all the details about the magic they'd seen.

"I know that, but think about it." Clara came up and joined our conversation. She peered down the river as she continued with her thought. "First of all, wouldn't he be cautious about whether or not his daughter was conned by someone angling to take over the duke's fortune and power?"

"That would be the normal course of thought."

"I'm sure he's being cautious and considering all the angles."

However, we were getting close to Filsand now, and the duke hadn't tried to approach us at all. The commander of Bruno Village didn't seem to have any instructions from him, either.

When I mentioned that, Elisabel replied immediately. "My father is probably planning to see your magic in action firsthand. So...please make sure to be especially careful in Filsand—or rather, at the Stalwart Castle."

About a three-day walk from the capital of Filsand and the Stalwart Castle stood a sudden and steep plateau. This was the Hidal Plateau, a barren land that looked like it was made by stacking weathered rocks. There were about three thousand members of the Schultz clan living behind the Hidal Plateau...ever since being driven out of Filsand. They called their hidden village the Holy Precincts, but the name didn't make the land any more fruitful. The people there lived off of plants that could grow in dry climates and livestock that could be raised in rocky lands.

Farther south along the plateau was the Twisted Wood, where beasts and monsters prowled, so the duke of Filsand had never really been interested in invading. Although it wasn't only lack of motive that kept the Filsand armed forces away. The Schultz clan had built a fortress at the entrance to the Hidal Plateau. This fortress blocked the only valley providing access to the plateau, and the brave warriors who guarded its walls had fought off countless attacks.

However, over the past few years, instead of working as a shield for the Holy Precincts, it had worked as a base for staging attacks on villages and caravans in Filsand territory. The duke had sent his daughter to Axeholm to procure siege weapons because he had grown impatient with the situation.

There was, however, a shortcut to the Holy Precincts that avoided the fortress by traveling through caves on the outskirts of the plateau.

"Ugh... Agh... I thought I wouldn't make it..."

"Hff... Hff..."

"I-I think my body is going to fall apart right here."

Naturally, only the Schultz warriors knew about this shortcut. That's right: It was Warmaster Diane and her subordinates, newly returned to the Holy Precincts by means of Geo's *Forced March* magic. However, when they got to the exit of the shortcut, everyone collapsed from extreme fatigue.

Only the phantom horse was breathing normally. It gave a snort.

"Hah, ugh...that jerk said 'severe exhaustion.' This is ten times worse than 'severe'..." Lade, warchief of the warrior clan, sat down on the ground, not bothering to remove his strange-looking armor. He struggled to control his breathing. They were all suffering from the side effects of the *Forced March* spell, which had allowed them to move at

multiple times their normal speed.

“Huff...hoo...it hurts... Oh, lord...”

Just one person, the dark elf, was acting as if the effects were no big deal. She seemed almost to be in a trance, but since no one even had the energy to look in her direction, it didn't cause any problems.

The hellish pain lasted for half a day (give or take), and soon, night fell.

“I'm going inside to take the lay of the land,” said Reyha. “You all wait here and behave yourselves.”

There was silence.

“Got it, Miss Reyha.”

The shortcut was in a corner of the rocky mountains that surrounded the narrow plains hosting the Holy Precincts. From there, they could see a village lined with impoverished houses, proving that the Holy Precincts didn't quite live up to their name. The stone temple in the center of the village stood out strongest. The Holy Precincts had first been established when the Schultz clan was driven to the Hidal Plateau and had discovered the remains of this ancient temple. There, they'd decided to found their settlement.

Reyha soon blended in with the darkness of night.

The Stalwart Castle was the residence of the duke of Filsand. We had to disembark the riverboat at the Filsand port and hoof it from there.

I had only passed through so far, but Filsand certainly did appear to be incredibly lively and prosperous. Elisabeth had mentioned that the population was approximately twenty thousand people. It was similar in size to Relis City, but Filsand was far more cosmopolitan in terms of the diversity of species and cultures. That was clearly thanks to the exchanges it conducted with so many other countries through maritime trade. I saw many people from the east and south of different species, wearing clothes completely different from those found around Ryuse.

“Did you get a load of that girl dancing in the square?”

“I won’t betray Keena! She’s definitely waiting for me back at the village...”

Ted and the young recruits were excited. I mean, I guess it was sort of—ah, who am I kidding? This was totally a vacation for them.

“Well, this place...it’s better than I imagined. I saw spices being sold at terrifyingly low prices back there.” Even Ild was excited.

“There really is a lot going on in this town. It’s not exactly elegant...but there is a sense of artistry to it all.”

It reminds me of Shinjuku or Akihabara...

In a way, it felt a bit like a holiday for all of us.

Outside of the large city gate around Filsand were even more refugees, living in tents just like they had outside of Bruno. They didn’t seem so poor that people were dying of starvation, but it was clear that the country was far from universally prosperous.

Regardless of whether or not he was evil, the ability to build and maintain such a flourishing capital did prove that the duke of Filsand was a competent ruler. Of course, there were the issues of the growing population of refugees and the war with the Schultz clan, but I was well aware that there wasn’t a single kingdom in the world, let alone Sedia, without its own problems.

The peninsula stretched out as if to protect Filsand Bay. At the apex of that peninsula was the Stalwart Castle, residence of the duke of Filsand.

The altitude of the peninsula grew higher the farther it stretched from the mainland, so from the castle we could see the entire town. It was probably true that the Schultz clan had built this city hundreds of years ago. Although the castle was large, its walls and buildings showed clear signs of age. Trading ships frequently came in and out of the port, and we could see the caravans that came and went through the main gate.

“*Mana Shield, Fly, Emergency, and Invincibility.*” I was checking the defense spells that I’d cast on myself and my allies when Clara poked

me from behind.

“Hey. Look up ahead there.”

“Hmmm...” I stopped short just before the moat that surrounded the castle wall, ringing the Stalwart Castle.

There was a small gate with a defensive tower right in front of us. On the other side of the moat was a drawbridge, but it was, of course, drawn.

“You there! Are you Geo Margilus, lord of Castle Getaeus?!” A soldier who seemed like a lookout called to me from the top of the tower. Maybe they’d heard about what I looked like from Adad or some other source. It didn’t sound too confrontational, and his voice was respectful enough.

“Odd...”

“What do you make of this, Mister Margilus?” Ild asked.

“There’s no sense in playing dumb now. You may as well answer.” I nodded in response to Ild’s question. I learned from Clara not to start responding to people ranked lower than me right away.

“That’s right! This is the lord of Castle Getaeus, the Great Wizard Geo Margilus and his companions! We are accompanied by Feivel of House Rimron, messenger from Axeholm. We request audience with Duke Darmund of Filsand!”

“Understood! Please wait a moment!” The soldier answered Ild’s stately declaration without hesitation. The drawbridge started moving immediately. Judging by the quick reaction, the soldier had already been issued instructions from the duke in advance.

While we waited for the slowly lowering drawbridge, which was wide enough for three horses to walk side by side, I continued to check the defense spells that I’d cast on Elisabel and Feivel. *I guess this will do for now...*

This time, I had also prepared my ESP Medal up the sleeve of my robe. This was an item I wanted to save for hostile opponents, but considering our current situation, I needed all the information I could get.

The drawbridge finally made it all the way down with a weighty thud. The gate behind it was, of course, open. We stood there for a moment.

“Let’s get on with it then, shall we?”

“Understood.”

“I’m ready.”

As second-ranked after me at Castle Getaeus, Ild took the lead. I walked behind him. Elisabel walked next to me, and Clara stood behind to guard our backs. After that were Ted and the three new recruits, then Feivel and the dwarf warriors.

I was a bit uneasy without Reyha, who could spot any trap or surprise attack, not to mention Lade, who could easily fend off those attacks...but that just meant I needed to step up and protect everyone myself.

“Please be careful. I’m not certain how exactly my father plans to test you,” Elisabel whispered to me. Honestly, I could never tell what she was thinking.

After passing through the castle gate, we came to a courtyard.

The first thing I noticed was the heavily armed soldiers who lined both sides of the path. There must have been at least three hundred of them. They all sported lightweight black equipment. By my reckoning, about half were infantry, while the other half were archers. The entire time we were walking, I didn’t hear so much as a cough out of any of them; they stood at attention the entire time. They must have been extremely disciplined.

The black keep stood tall before us. Each of its four corners sported a defensive tower, and the sharp-angled architecture was intimidating. A terrace protruded from the large doors on the second floor and a wide staircase led down to the courtyard.

The line of soldiers seemed to naturally form a path to the keep. Looking even farther ahead, I could make out the shapes of several people waiting on the terrace. They were surely subordinates of the duke of Filsand.

“I don’t know what kind of man he is, but this isn’t exactly a warm welcome for his daughter’s fiancé, nor the lord of a castle

requesting trade.” Ild gulped.

The soldiers on either side of us were really intimidating. I felt exactly the same way.

“You don’t think...is my father going to use his military on Margilus?” Even Elisabeth’s red eyes were open wide in surprise. Was he trying to kill me or test me? I wasn’t sure at this point.

Clara spoke up, trying to lighten the mood. “In a way, this is perfectly suitable for welcoming Margilus, at least initially. If he wants to stand a chance against us, he’ll need at least this much preparation.”

I looked back without thinking to see Clara’s inappropriate smile.

This woman again... Could she be a goddess?

I gripped my Staff of Wizardry and walked confidently.

Ild and Ted were also standing taller than usual. Even the dwarves were humming to themselves. We were very conscious of the endless lines of soldiers on either side of us until we finally reached the bottom of the staircase in front of the castle tower.

Once we got that close, we could clearly see what kind of person awaited us on the terrace.

The man in the center, draped all in black, was definitely the duke of Filsand. His dignified aura and penetrating stare were different from everyone else’s. By his side stood a beautiful woman with somewhat revealing clothing, a man in a red robe, an elderly fellow with white hair, and a young man with black hair.

Elisabeth whispered to me that the beautiful woman was the duke’s first wife, Alaine; the man in the red robe was Nathan, the court sorcerer; the elderly man was Prime Minister Juzell; and the young man was the duke’s second-born son, Agveil.

According to the *Sense of the Adept* spell that I’d cast earlier, the duke was a Human Male, Age 43, equivalent to a Level 15 *D&B* Warrior. At least now I understood why he was considered so strong. I could also see that the court sorcerer equaled a Level 10 Magic User, and the beautiful woman was a Level 7 Magic User. Incidentally, the *Detect*

Enemy spell that I'd also cast in advance was showing three enemies, and they did not include the duke or the court sorcerer.

"Welcome to Filsand. I am Darmund, lord of Filsand," The black-armored man in the center addressed us with a loud voice. When he waved his hand slightly, the soldiers lined up on either side of us responded.

"We salute the Great Wizard Geo Margilus!" They hit the ground with their weapons in unison and each placed a hand upon their chests. It looked like he wasn't planning on suddenly attacking us with all these soldiers.

As I gazed at them, my mind wandering, Clara poked me in the back again. *Sorry again...* Since the duke of Filsand had gone out of his way to introduce himself first, I was the one who had to speak to him.

"I am Geo Margilus, wizard and lord of Castle Getaeus. Allow me to express my gratitude for your taking the time to see me." I looked up at the duke of Filsand and bowed ever so slightly by drawing in my chin. This type of greeting is only allowed between aristocrats of equal status. The prime minister and duchess had displeased looks on their faces, but the duke didn't seem to mind.

"Now, Margilus. There is much I would like to discuss with you... but I hope to address one or two matters right away. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. What seems to be the issue?"

The duke turned his black eyes to the person next to me. Elisabeth's pigtailed were quivering. "Elisabeth. You have placed your bet on this wizard. Do you stand by that wager?"

I gritted my teeth.

Elisabeth clenched the silver staff in her hand and looked up at her father with her red eyes. "Yes, Father. Lord Geo Margilus is worthy of entrusting with my life."

Well, she certainly thought highly of me. *I wonder when her opinion rose so much.* In any case, I'm sure she had her own opinion about everything. Her eyes harbored a power that I never would have imagined when we first met.

"Heh..."

The duke of Filsand stroked his chin, seemingly amused. Perhaps he had already realized that the engagement was merely a temporary

expedience. In contrast, his wife and the prime minister were clearly mocking her. Only Agveil's face looked pale. I sensed that only he and the duke trusted Elisabeth's intelligence. They were probably thinking that their sister (or daughter) would never rely this much on a scammer or a common sorcerer.

"I understand clearly," the duke said as he turned his gaze to me. While I found myself wishing he'd share a few more words with his daughter, he put his hand on the longsword at his hip and slowly drew it. It was probably a magical sword. Even I, who wasn't supposed to be able to perceive the magical powers of this world, could clearly make out the glimmering shine surrounding the weapon.

"Now, Margilus. You need only convince me of one thing: Do you possess sufficient *power* to take my treasured daughter from me?"

"You mean, in a duel?" On the inside I was astonished that he might be telling me to defeat him if I wanted his daughter, but that wasn't something I needed to worry about. The duke pointed to the soldiers with his magic sword, and they cleanly parted down the center. Two shadows appeared between them.

"Yes, a duel. It seems my daughter has grown unexpectedly popular. There are others who wish to challenge you to deadly combat, with my daughter as the prize."

One of the young men was a strong-looking, brown-skinned fellow. He was clad in black armor and held a long spear in his hand. At a glance, I could tell he was relatively handsome. According to my *Sense of the Adept*, he was a Human Male, Age 23, Level 12 Warrior.

The other was a giant of a man, pale-skinned, towering at two meters tall. He had heavy chains wrapped all around his entire body in lieu of armor. His weapon was a long-handled, double-edged axe. Human Male, Age 35, Level 10 Warrior. He looked so ferocious that I doubted the spell's assessment that he was human.

When Elisabeth saw the two opponents, she choked down a little scream in the back of her throat.

"That young warrior is captain of the duke's guard. He's the strongest warrior in Filsand, besides my father. The other is a war thrall—a battle slave. He's already killed dozens of rebels and enemy soldiers. The captain is a big enough challenge, but they sent him, too...?"

The duke of Filsand lifted his chin a bit higher. The court sorcerer

next to him shrugged his shoulders and then came down the stairs.

“The red robe he wears symbolizes that he is a sorcerer of the Faction of the Blessed,” Clara informed me. “Their school believes that sorcery is nothing but a tool to make humans rich.” I remembered Clara was part of the Faction of Conquerors, whose members viewed sorcery primarily as a means to fight against daemons. The various sorcery factions didn’t really seem so different to me in practice, though.

“So, there you have it,” the duke said, spreading his hands apart. “I do apologize, Margilus, but I’ll need you to duel with all who would seek my daughter’s hand.”

It seemed Elisabel only had three suitors so far. I finally understood. Just as Elisabel had said, the duke would confirm my strength in this duel. Since he presented them as her suitors, and I presented myself as her fiancé, there was no way I could refuse or criticize him. *How clever.*

“I accept.”

I hadn’t exactly been expecting a duel, but I had prepared for the worst-case scenario, which would be the entire army attacking us.

They probably weren’t expecting me to respond so quickly—the prime minister and his wife looked surprised, at least. The duke himself just grinned, looking thoroughly amused.

“Geo Margilus, the mighty wizard. I look forward to seeing all your strengths.”

Chapter 5

THE SOLDIERS SHIFTED to form a ring, and in its center I stood alone. Clara, Elisabel, and the others were waiting outside of that circle. In front of me were the three “suitors,” including the new captain and the battle slave, with the court sorcerer lagging behind.

I guess the military captain and the sorcerer made sense, but it was pretty hard to believe that the battle slave was a suitor. “He was probably selected by my stepmother,” Elisabel explained coolly. “That’s because there are no especially strong fighters in the knights led by my half-brother Agveil. Consider him a stand-in. Someone else’s champion.”

“Let the duel begin! The winner will receive my daughter, Elisabel Roney Filsandia.”

“Woo!”

“Grrr...”

The courtyard grew quiet. The captain prepared himself, gripping his spear; the slave slung his axe over his shoulder. The eyes of the captain looked fully prepared for combat, while the battle slave...well, he just looked bloodthirsty. The sorcerer behind them held his staff calmly.

“Langer be praised!” The duke called out the name of the god of war. It was our signal to start the duel.

“Rrrgh!”

As expected, the battle slave rushed me immediately, brandishing his double-bladed axe. The captain was one step behind him. The sorcerer pointed his staff toward me and let out a short shout: “*Dark Cage!*”

“Huh?”

An endless number of black pillars appeared around me. The pillars connected above my head and trapped me like a birdcage. *Wait a second!* I thought he would have started with some sort of sorcery like *Calm Sounds* to try and silence my incantations.

“Gaah! Hyah!”

“Yaagh!”

The battle slave deftly swung his axe through the gaps in the Dark Cage. However, my familiar Invisible Demon was blocking that nicely. The captain charged in next, thrusting with his spear—but it was just as ineffective.

Due to the severity of the situation, I summoned three Invisible Demons that day. From their perspective, both warriors were stabbing the air with their weapons only to find intangible resistance.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

“Why don’t the slave and captain move?”

In Filsand, strength was probably synonymous with trustworthiness. The incomprehensible situation facing these two warriors led to uneasy chatter among the soldiers.

“How did he use sorcery inside a cage that blocks magical powers?! It must be some strange materia or magical focus!” The sorcerer twisted his clean-shaven face and yelled out another incantation. “*Dark Spear!*” The way he flowed from one sorcery to the next really showed why he was qualified to serve the duke.

The cage I was trapped in disappeared. Instead, a spear wrought from pure darkness shot out of the end of the sorcerer’s staff.

Now that the weird cage is gone, it’s time to move. I activated the effect of the *Fly* spell that I’d chanted in advance and flew seven or eight meters into the air.

“What the?!” the sorcerer cried in surprise. His dark spear pierced the ground where I had been standing mere seconds ago. Something like a poisonous mist spewed out from the point of impact.

“Argh...!”

“Gaaah!”

The captain and slave had finally escaped from the Demons’ restraints, and looked up at me in frustration. There was nothing more they could do if they only had close combat weapons.

“This...this is it! *Valvord Galeiza!*” The court sorcerer raised his staff with both arms as he yelled. The staff shined blue, and its length started to charge with thunder. He floated up in the air, grasping his staff, which had transformed into a spear of lightning. As I flew at him,

he remained steadfast, pointing his crackling weapon straight at me. It was pretty amazing sorcery, but I was prepared.

KA-BOOM!

There was an explosion about halfway between the sorcerer and myself. The magnitude of the blast was substantial, and it dispersed into lightning instead of flames. It was probably capable of blowing a giant to pieces. The soldiers below were scrambling to get away, too. But I was unscathed. My Mana Shield was working nicely.

“What?!”

“N-Nathan’s sorcery...!”

“You must have somehow armed yourself in advance!”

Under the *D&B* rules that governed my spells, spears made from sorcery were not deemed to be magic. Therefore, *Invincibility*, which defends only against magic, was not effective against sorcerous attacks. However, the simplest defense spell, *Mana Shield*, was an invisible barrier that automatically reacted to any attack. My guess that the type of attack was irrelevant turned out to be correct, so it could even defend against a spear made from sorcery.

“A higher level of sorcery than mine? How can you possibly defend against my Thunder Spear?! What manner of trickery is this?!” Clearly, I’d struck a nerve with the court sorcerer. I suppose in a way I was cheating, but I couldn’t afford to lose this duel. Sorry, not sorry.

After flying a bit higher, I started chanting a spell. “As a consequence of this spell, thunder and storms and oceans will transform. I will create a mighty blue dragon in this space under my command for a duration of thirty minutes. *Create Monster: Any!*”

“Wh...what the hell...?”

“Grrr...!”

“Impossible...!”

As soon as I finished chanting the spell, the sky above me began to swirl. The air slowly rippled from nothingness to a thick, syrupy, swirling aura. The two warriors and sorcerer stood petrified. Out on the terrace, the duke and his party were shrinking back, as were the soldiers that enclosed our contest.

The next bit wasn’t strictly necessary, but I felt like putting on a

show.

I bellowed: “Come forth! Huge blue dragon!”

A giant shadow emerged from the distorted air. The shadow grew thicker, resolving into a black mass of darkness, which then grew and twisted, spreading out and taking shape.

“Raaargh!”

A long neck, tail, and wings appeared. The massive body was wrapped in blue scales. The huge blue dragon that appeared was a Level 32 monster.

Ild shaded his eyes with his hand and looked up at the sky.

“Wow, a blue one this time?” he asked gleefully.

“It’s rather elegant,” said Clara.

“That’s our Margilus!”

Outside the circle of Filsand army soldiers surrounding Geo and the other combatants, the Getaeus delegation watched from a spot by the castle wall. They were completely relaxed looking up at the blue dragon. Before entering the Stalwart Castle, Geo had spent a frankly irritating amount of time casting spells, so they knew he was prepared. They weren’t worried about him in the slightest.

“A-amazing...” The only person in this group who’d never seen a dragon before was the dumbstruck Elisabel. “There’s no way Lord Margilus would point that dragon at my father, is there...?” She was already imagining the worst.

“There is no way he would do that.” Clara patted the pale-faced young girl on her head. “That man always does everything in his power to win without harming a single person.”

“I-Is that so? Er...”

Clara gazed at Geo, her hand still on Elisabel’s head. He was maneuvering a giant dragon while deflecting sorcery. Her blue eyes looked at him with deep admiration and pride. Elisabel had noticed one more thing: As Clara stared up at Geo, she gripped her staff so tightly

that her knuckles were turning white.

Elisabel couldn't figure out if the emotion that tightened her grip was pain, anger, or pity.

"Clara, you—"

"This is why he needs me to do my job. Like this!"

"Agh?!"

Clara suddenly tackled Elisabeth, bringing her to the ground. A single arrow whizzed by, passing the exact space where Elisabeth's chest had been just a moment earlier.

The court sorcerer, Nathan, was trembling with fear.

He'd expected the wizard named Geo Margilus to have extraordinary powers. He knew, because he was unable to brush away the many, many reports from the spies he'd dispatched throughout the realm. They spoke of a wizard who dropped meteors like it was nothing or casually summoned giants. It was too much to attribute simply to trickery and illusion. That's why he guessed that the reason was something like possession of an unknown high-level materia or a massive amount of maleithrilin.

But I didn't imagine this... I don't sense any mana at all... I don't see any sign of enchanted items or maleithrilin...

Geo had stopped Filsand's two strongest warriors with something invisible, blocked his own sorcery with some sort of unclear means, flown into the air and made a dragon appear...out of thin air. If he had materia or maleithrilin, Nathan would have sensed their mana. But he sensed nothing at all.

"It doesn't make sense... It's impossible..." It wasn't only the court sorcerer who was staring dumbfounded at the dragon, which stared back down with utmost calm.

The most important people in Filsand stared as well. They watching the duel between fiancé and suitors from the terrace in front of the keep's main gate, mouths agape.

"I-It can't be... There's no mana...no mana at all..."

“Eh heh...eh heh heh heh...”

As a sorceress herself, Alaine, first wife of the duke, was in shock. She sat on the floor, clutching her son, Agveil. The white-haired prime minister couldn't do anything but gasp, a look of deathly fear on his face. He was clutching his chest with one hand so hard it looked like he was desperately trying to make sure his heart didn't stop beating.

“Dragons don't just appear out of nowhere...! This is neither sorcery nor conjuring... It must be inherited from the ancient kingdom of the gods, or a new technology from Shrendal...right?”

Although he was shaking, Agveil remained relatively calm. He was desperately trying to stand strong after seeing his normally ice-cold, high-handed mother in this vulnerable state.

And then there was the duke of Filsand.

“This...this man...! Is this really the power that I've been searching for...? If it is, then...then...!”

Only the duke showed no fear toward the dragon. He gazed upon both the beast and Geo with wonder and amazement, taking it all in. He grinned from ear to ear, ablaze with fiery ambition.

“Garrgh?! Greee!”

“Damn it, this isn't what I signed up for... I don't have a chance against this!” Probably experiencing the most fear out of anyone on the Filsand side were the battle slave and captain of the duke's guard. Both stood directly below the blue dragon. The slave, who'd worked himself into a feral, animalistic frenzy, now curled up in a ball and screamed. Beside him, the captain froze, paralyzed with fright. It took everything he had to just keep his eyes on the dragon.

“She's here!”

“G-got it!”

“Miss Elisabeth!”

“Yeah! Let’s do it!”

Ted and the new recruits quickly put up their shields, building a wall around Elisabeth and Clara. Ild also hid behind them, while the dwarves stood facing out, crossbows loaded.

“There! *Falbolza!*”

Clara swiftly picked out where the shooter was. From her position atop Elisabeth, she aimed her staff at a window in the castle wall.

There was a row of several such windows. Behind them, archers seemed to be lurking.

“Wha?!”

Clara’s fire arrow soared, striking an archer holding a mounted crossbow right in the head. She’d probably adjusted the strength of the arrow, because they could see the still-living archer, hair aflame, running away desperately.

“Yah! Shoot! Get ’em!”

The dwarf warriors aimed their special Axeholm crossbows. They followed up Clara’s flaming arrow with arrows made of steel. The thick bolts loaded in their crossbows were far more powerful than those made for humans, and while some struck the archers, those that missed embedded in the castle walls, a testament to their strength.

There was a lot of commotion as the remaining archers fled. They probably realized that it wasn’t possible to assassinate Elisabeth through the wall of shields. Still, it was impressive that they even tried to execute an assassination while there was a massive dragon floating in the air above them.

“Hah! And don’t come back now!” Clara, on her knees in order to shield Elisabeth, lifted the corners of her lips in a competitive smile. Elisabeth was mesmerized by her beauty for a moment, but soon snapped back to reality.

“Miss Clara! Everyone! Are you all right?!”

One of the dwarves brushed himself off. “Heh. This ain’t nothin’!”

“We wouldn’t be able to face Margilus if we let something happen to you.”

Ted, the recruits, and Ild offered smiles of relief. Needless to say,

the dwarves were also unscathed.

Clara helped Elisabel up. “We figured that the aristocratic faction would try to eliminate you at some point. There are savages everywhere.”

“The aristocratic faction... That means my stepmother and half-brother Agveil. It’s true... With me out of the picture, Agveil will be the only potential successor.”

“Well, that fool’s plot ends here.”

“I wonder,” Elisabel frowned. She didn’t think it would be so easy to suppress the desires of those seeking the power and wealth of Filsand and the Stalwart Castle.

Clara looked up at Geo again. The defense against the assassin hadn’t even taken a minute. The dragon was slowly flapping its wings up and down, at the end of some aerial maneuver.

“Yes... It’s neither elegant nor perfect, but he’s right. When the times call for it, this is the true role of a wizard: to cast aside the common sense and reason of the mortal world.”

The blue dragon roared. A blinding bolt of lightning shot from its mouth. Clara looked like she was thoroughly enjoying watching the dragon mow down the suitors and soldiers on the ground, as well as watching the middle-aged man who controlled that dragon.

At first, I looked down on the panic of the Filsand camp with a bit of regret.

But when I saw that Clara and the others were being attacked at the edge of the courtyard, my blood froze. Although I was thoroughly relieved to see the way they handily counterattacked and drove off the assassins, unfortunately, my impression of Filsand worsened.

“I’m sorry, but I’m going to make sure that you can never do that again.”

It seemed that all three suitors and the soldiers had lost their willingness to fight. While most were petrified, frozen in place, some even ran away.

The leaders of the duchy of Filsand on the terrace were reacting in the same way as the soldiers. Among them, only the duke himself looked confident.

“Now, blue dragon! *Stun Lightning!*”

There was a lot going on, but I needed to rise to the occasion. I gave the order with high spirits.

KRA-KOOM!

Above my head, the blue dragon spread its jaws and spewed blue lightning bolts. It moved its head left and right, sweeping over the suitors and the soldiers along the way. There was a thunderous roaring sound and a flash. I heard the screams of the warriors and soldiers. The violence of the lightning, like a raging tornado that connected the earth to the heavens, continued until about half of the soldiers were on the ground. The advantage of this attack was that it simply stunned any targets who failed to resist the lightning attack, all without causing any damage. It was really convenient for disabling enemies in large numbers.

Once the blue dragon’s breath attack was over, I landed in the courtyard.

The three suitors and most of the soldiers were either unconscious or had fallen on the ground in disbelief. Both the air and the ground reeked of flames.

The dragon also landed behind me.

“First of all, does this mean that I’ve won the duel?” I spoke to the duke, standing between the frightened prime minister and his wife, in as calm and collected a voice as I could muster. I thought the decision would be quick, but the duke started coming down the stairs, his eyes sparkling.

“Lord Margilus. May I have a moment?” The duke couldn’t take his eyes off the dragon behind me.

“Wh...what is it?” I thought that if he came any closer to me, I would be overwhelmed by the oppressive aura emanating from his

body. So this was what a general with a decades-long history of conquest looked like. If I hadn't already come to know the wrath of Lade and Reyha, then I could see myself kneeling before this duke.

But I hadn't lived the life of a great wizard until recently. Ultimately, I was still a pretender in the role. I gripped my Staff of Wizardry and steadied my trembling legs, standing as tall as I could.

"Please, let me test its might. Just once." The duke drew his magical sword. He kept staring at the dragon. I couldn't tell if he was challenging it in earnest, or actually hoped to fail. I had no idea what he was going to say to me, but he couldn't very well kill me right there, so I nodded.

"As you wish."

"Thank you." The duke gripped his magic sword with both hands and faced the blue dragon. He had considerable power, if not quite as much as Lade. However...he proved to be useless in front of the massive, four-legged beast. It towered over him like a wall.

"Hrah!" The duke let out a battle cry. He thrust his magic sword into the base of the dragon's neck. His attack would have easily skewered heavily armored knights and giants. However, the sword rebounded off the dragon's blue scales. There was a ringing of metal hitting metal.

"Erm... Hmph... I see. It's real."

I thought the duke would try slaying the dragon many more times, but instead, he raised his sword to the heavens.

"The duel for Elisabeth Roney Filsandia has come to an end. The winner is the wizard, Geo Margilus. I, Darmund, duke of Filsand, hereby bestow upon him all the honors and rights of victory!"

I got the feeling that a marriage between Elisabeth and me was drawing closer and closer to reality... There was nothing I could do about it just then, so I bowed slightly and raised my Staff of Wizardry high in the air.

"Spread the word! The legitimate winner of the duel is Geo Margilus! Anyone who threatens the safety of Elisabeth threatens me, your duke, and will not be forgiven! Hear this: Anyone who does harm to Elisabeth shall suffer the wrath of the great wizard!"

"Oh... I see."

Everyone who was still conscious (except for the duke) nodded their heads furiously. The duke nodded in satisfaction and turned back to his first wife.

“Did you hear that? I support the Lord Wizard. I think you understand how things stand, yes?”

“Er... I-I understand! I understand, dear husband. My Lord Wizard! I will no longer... Or rather, I vow to do everything in my power to protect Elisabel!”

“A-as Elisabel’s older brother, I also will not forgive anyone who causes my sister harm.”

The duke’s words to his wife and second son were, in fact, a threat. His wife’s fear was especially pitiful to behold. She was probably also still frightened by the lightning, but the duke made it clear to his wife that he was completely on the side of Elisabel and me. That must have been devastating.

“Good. Now, let’s begin the welcome party.”

Chapter 6

I WAS SHOWN TO THE COURTYARD of the Stalwart Castle.

There were a number of huge tables set out. Dishes made with the delicacies of the nearby seas and mountains lined their surface. Musicians played elegant songs, and beautiful women clad in thin silk danced for our entertainment.

I was seated at the head of the table next to the duke. On one side of me were my friends (Elisabel took the end seat, looking uncomfortable), and on the opposite side sat the duke's subordinates.

The duke of Filsand was in a great mood. The court sorcerer, prime minister, the duchess, and her son all had long faces. The duke's son Agveil looked especially drawn.

"Thank you for inviting me here," I told them. "My gratitude knows no bounds."

The duke sat next to me. He'd started this banquet without taking time for any formalities or protocol, so it was a far more casual affair than Clara had warned me it would be. I let myself relax a bit. I was more concerned about the naked, nervous fear visible in the duke's subordinates and servants. There may have been some fear there over the wizard (me), but it seemed like they feared the duke most of all.

"The pleasure is all mine," said the duke, amiable. "It's not every day I get to host someone who is both a great hero and also possesses fantastical magical powers."

I didn't answer.

"Go ahead and feast to your heart's content. It seems like you've done a lot for my daughter."

There was no way I could read his true intentions just by sitting there and watching him. I didn't have the stomach to put myself inside his head.

While I was making excuses to myself, I grasped and activated my ESP Medal in the sleeve of my robe. Although the duke was decked out in high-grade materia and armor, Elisabel told me in advance that he

possessed no defense against mental attacks. I was normally reluctant to look into people's souls, but it was unavoidable this time.

The internal thoughts of the duke sitting beside me were conveyed to me through the power of the ESP Medal.

There is just no ambition in his expression... He looks like nothing more than a lowly junior officer of the Sorcerers' Guild.

He was criticizing me right from the start. It was none of his business, but I couldn't say he was wrong.

"So, what is it that drew you to my daughter? Between you and me, she's pretty high-maintenance, and frankly, not even that cute."

But his power is real. That dragon alone could defeat any army. Forget the barbarians, it could even destroy Thanessand with ease. If we were to team up...we could even take on Velde. Eventually, our dominion would spread to every point of the compass!

I almost spit out my (slightly) spicy barbecued beef. Every thought in this man's head was that of a warlord!

"H-heh. I think she's an intelligent and attractive girl." The only thing I was sure of at this point was that there could be no marriage between Elisabel and myself. "Though there is much I want to discuss with you about your daughter. I feel I am not yet qualified to be her husband."

"Hmph. If you say so, it must be true."

I was sure he was going to banish me after marrying Elisabel, but maybe that's not his plan. Is he thinking that someone like me would give in so easily that he doesn't have to consider such details?

I found my own thoughts growing frustrated. *How does he do that? There isn't even the slightest hint of his true thoughts on his face. How infuriating...*

As far as I could tell from reading the duke's thoughts, he believed that I'd achieved my alliance with the Calbanera Knights, Relis City, and Axeholm through force. It was true that I'd behaved impudently in all of those places. Considering that, from a certain point of view, it wasn't really an exaggeration to say I'd used my overwhelming power to force the weak into submission.

“Good wizard, please have a drink.”

“Sure...”

A waitress whose uniform was so skimpy she might as well have been naked poured me a cup. While I was trying to avert my eyes, the duke spoke to me again, still pretending to be in the best of moods.

“Now, where should we start? I have a lot I want to discuss with you, too... Let’s just follow etiquette and start with your business.”

Hmm. Doesn’t even look at the girl. He’s already taken the sorceress, the dark elf—although she’s not here—and now Elisabel. Well, at least I know he likes women. But not this woman, eh? I thought he was partial to the voluptuous type... Does that mean he has his hands full already?

The ESP Medal could truly read what someone was thinking, and it was so effective for negotiations that it was unfair...but it was damaging my soul.

I decided to focus and start with the easily agreeable items.

“I-I beg your pardon. Certainly, let’s get my agenda out of the way. The first item is a proposal concerning Lord Feivel, the Axeholm dwarves, and Castle Getaeus.”

“Aye, that’s right, Your Grace. We dwarves judged Laird Margilus’s overture to be most fine.”

“It’s a straightforward matter,” I assured the duke. With some input from Feivel, I explained the development plan for a new trade route connecting Relis City, Castle Getaeus, Axeholm, and Filsand. I was sure he was already somewhat informed, but he had a surprised look on his face.

“Oh. That’s even more than I could have hoped for. Making it easier to receive goods from Axeholm and the Ryuse Alliance would help Filsand flourish even more.”

I heard about this, but it turns out he can speak for himself after all. He understands not just the importance of force, but of money as well. He’s a dangerous man...but If I have his power, then I really can take over Velde. Maybe I can finally realize my dream...

So, it seemed the duke’s ambition was taking over Velde. They

said that war between humans in this daemon-riddled world was rare... but here was one of the exceptions.

If I didn't do something, I would get dragged along in his ruse and help him take over Velde. It would hurt my efforts with the trade route, but I couldn't let myself get any more deeply involved with him.

"Hmm? Sorry. Perhaps this wasn't sufficient inspiration for you, Lord Margilus? Musicians, you are dismissed! Bring the prisoner from the dungeon and the beast we captured! They will fight to the death for our entertainment!" The duke, misunderstanding my sigh for one of boredom, made a shocking request.

"No, no, no. I don't want to see that. I much prefer the music that was just playing, and the dancers. It was so wonderful that it made me sigh in admiration."

"Is that right? That's fine then. Carry on!"

This man, who can freely manipulate dragons and giants, is really interested in such frivolous entertainment? A terrifying man with a dull face.

I was starting to understand. The duke wasn't particularly stupid. In fact, he had an excellent mind and information network. But according to his beliefs and worldview, he was unable to imagine a person like me, one who had power but didn't use it for himself.

I still had a few things to discuss with him. I accepted the lavish hospitality and tried to calm my nerves.

That night, I was invited to the duke's quarters. Apparently, he had an after-party planned.

His chambers were clean, but scattered with vicious-looking armor. The bookshelf overflowed with books on military tactics, and mounted bear and wolf heads loomed upon the walls. The decor really seemed to reflect his character.

The duke had shed his formal coat, and I likewise removed my robe, attending in a shirt and pants. In other words, I wouldn't be able to secretly use my ESP Medal this time. *Well...I'm sure I'll get through it somehow.*

“I’m sorry to rush you, Lord Margilus. I just couldn’t wait any longer.”

“It’s fine. However, I would like to keep this meeting just between us. A private chat.”

“Hmm? Oh, certainly. Of course.”

I felt unexpectedly relaxed. The duke was definitely a villain who didn’t think twice about crushing people who stood in his way—but he was friendly to those he deemed valuable. Was this the mindset of a conqueror?

“Please, have a drink. Elisabeth is a very lucky girl, you know. She found a genuine hero just before she was going to be assassinated.” The duke poured me a glass from an expensive-looking bottle shaped to resemble a dragon. He was awfully casual about mentioning his daughter’s near-murder.

“Did you know that your son and daughter were fighting?”

“A surprisingly serious question!” He looked genuinely unsettled.

“It’s just...even setting aside ethics, it’s hard to believe there’s benefit to you from leaving your successors to fight amongst themselves.”

“Oh, is that what you’re on about? Well...” he shrugged his shoulders slightly and continued. “Alaine and Agveil rushed into removing Elisabeth without my permission. I’m sure if Elisabeth wanted, she could have gotten the prime minister involved and stood up to them. The way I see it, if I appointed whoever survived their conflict, then I wouldn’t have to be bothered picking the successor myself.”

I kept silent. I’d had just about enough of this duke. I wanted to break through the glass and get as far away from him as possible. However, even though I felt anger and disgust toward him, for some reason, I couldn’t quite bring myself to look down on him. I wonder if it was because he didn’t have a humble bone in his body...

“You say that,” I said, “but it’s clear Elisabeth was at an enormous disadvantage. Don’t you care for Elisabeth and her mother, your former wife?”

“Oho.”

I was treading into very personal territory. But as a single man with no children, I couldn’t get over my curiosity about what the duke

was thinking. I thought he would laugh in my face, but instead he had a surprisingly serious look. He played with the empty glass in his hand for a few moments before looking up at me.

“Well, Shayla was an amazing woman. That was precisely why I took her for my own—she impressed me, Margilus. Truly. I gave her the most luxurious life I could. I think that shows I cared for her. I also provided the very best life and education for Elisabel.”

The thought occurred to me that pushing further might hurt whatever friendship existed in our relationship. But I couldn’t help myself.

“But wasn’t it a forced marriage?”

“And what of it? I had the power to take Shayla, and I used that power. I don’t see anything unusual about it.”

I didn’t need my ESP Medal here. I could tell from his eyes and attitude that he spoke the truth. And I’d learned one more thing.

He was me.

He was just like me when I’d almost cast the *Charm* spell on Mora. If things had gone differently, I could have ended up like him. He was me, but drunk with power.

“I see...”

If I had used my magical powers for my own desires, how would I have turned out? Would I have been even more of a tyrant than the duke of Filsand who sat before me? Or would I have been beheaded before that by someone who considered me a threat?

Now I had companions who I could trust to watch my back. The duke couldn’t even trust his own children, and they certainly didn’t trust him. It was clear the duke didn’t regret his life, but as someone who knew what it was like to feel the allure of power, I couldn’t help but be thankful that I hadn’t turned out like him.

“I can’t really say I understand,” I told him. “But I think every man wants to walk that path at some time or another in their life.”

“Heh heh. That just sounds like sarcasm, coming from someone

with your powers.” His words weren’t meant to be a compliment. He was still speaking without pretense.

I knew his type. There was a time when I even admired the villains of manga and novels, or the ambitious generals of the Sengoku period in Japan. This duke would definitely be a villain in modern-day Japan, and if he were to unilaterally attack me, I’m sure I would fight and defeat him without hesitation.

But for some reason, here we were, drinking together. And more than anything, I couldn’t escape the thought that he was another version of me. He couldn’t be a member of my team, or my friend, and we would probably never understand each other. But even so... It wouldn’t hurt to look for something that I could do for him and his family. Perhaps there was a small possibility that he would be known as a good ruler to future generations.

We had a pretty good time, two middle-aged men drinking together. I was even able to retreat to the building prepared for me before getting too belligerent. It was indeed a whole building, not a guest room—a magnificent three-story stone mansion built within the Stalwart Castle’s walls to house honored guests.

It was a luxurious accommodation, better than a three-star hotel (not that I’d ever stayed in a three-star hotel), and came complete with maids, musicians, and even a doctor. It was a lavish welcome, but I couldn’t let my guard down when it came to the duke. I took strict precautions. I used *Detect Enemy* to check all of the servants, cast *Wizard Key* on the door, and set *Wall of Force* on my bedroom to secure a safe perimeter. Out in the hall, I cast *Soldiers of Bronze* and *Invisible Demon* on the back ceiling and windowsills.

Incidentally, Feivel and the other dwarves stayed on the first floor, Ild and my other friends stayed on the second floor, and the third floor was reserved for Elisabel and myself.

We all gathered on the top floor in the master suite.

“I’m glad everyone is all right,” I said, relieved after hearing the details of the attack on Elisabel from Clara. Clara, Ted, and the new

recruits looked proud. The dwarves also seemed satisfied. Looking at the expressions on their faces reminded me of Clara's words: *They're happy working for you.*

I see. So this is what she was talking about. This was an opportunity to reward them as their "lord."

"Thank you. You did a wonderful job, truly commendable. When we get back to Castle Getaeus, you'll all receive a bonus."

"This escort mission is kind of like being an adventurer. And low-status nobles are the same everywhere you go."

"Heh heh heh. I *am* a member of Sedam's warrior party, ya know."

"M-Master Margilus, thank you for your praise."

"I can't wait to tell my father back in the village..."

"I am glad that we could return even a small amount of the favors you have done for us."

I wished I had better words to express myself. Everyone was full of joy.

Next, I reported on my conversation with the duke of Filsand, and the hidden thoughts he kept to himself. His ambition was to use me to conquer Velde.

"To think, a war of territorial invasion in this day and age..." Clara shrugged.

"I didn't realize he was planning something so massive... But now that I think about it, my father has been angry about being charged taxes by his home country of Velde for some time now." Elisabel pursed her lips. Everyone else was frowning, too. Well, I'm sure I had the same expression on my own face.

"Now, he needs to understand that all we want is trade, cooperation with the anti-daemon alliance, and Elisabel's safety." Ild summarized what we needed to do, and everyone else, including me, agreed.

“However,” Clara started, looking around at everyone before sharing her opinion. “We cannot show any weakness to the duke. Think about what would happen if he saw through Margilus’s personality.”

“Wh-what would happen?”

“You can bet on this: He would control you. Economically, politically, and emotionally. If the duke wanted, he could put pressure on Relis City, the Calbanera Knights, and Axeholm. He would take hostages to threaten you without a second thought,” Clara explained, showing her knowledge of aristocratic intrigue.

“Absolutely,” Elisabeth nodded, agreeing with the assessment of her father.

“I-I see.” If he came at us with that, I wouldn’t be able to fight him off with my current powers. I was strong in magic, but social and political niceties weren’t exactly my forte.

“Okay. Let’s do what we can not to get taken in. Even where Elisabeth’s safety is concerned, it would be better if he feared me.”

“I’m sorry to bring this up now, but if it weren’t for me, you would have it much easier.” Elisabeth bowed her head in gratitude after hearing my words.

“No, don’t worry about that. This is my job as a wizard. And you’re my ally. It’s natural for me to protect you.”

“But I don’t have a single thing to offer you as your ally.” The daughter of the duke looked increasingly dejected. To be honest, she must have been aware of that in the first place, and planned to use me regardless. She’d probably had a change of heart at some point. Hopefully in a good way.

“That’s it!” After she’d thought for a few minutes, biting her dainty lip, Elisabeth’s face suddenly lit up. “What if we make my father’s imagined scenario a reality?! Marry me, and let’s exile my father! You’re more than qualified to take over as Filsand’s new ruler, Lord Margilus!”

Clara, who was watching Elisabeth’s expression closely, let out a nervous guffaw.

I was silent, my mouth agape.

Everyone else had similar reactions.

“Why would he do that?!”

WHAP!

Before I could say anything, Clara slapped the side of Elisabeth's head with an open hand. It was like a comedy routine.

“Ehh?! Umm, sorry. I mean, I can just be a mistress or a second wife!” Elisabeth came back with the perfect comedic response, too.

“That's not the issue!”

“Aaagh...!”

“Umm...” Even Ted and Ild looked disturbed.

I guess you never grow out of being the daughter of a duke.

But if you looked at it from the perspective of more influential folk and their subordinates, Elisabeth's way of thinking was probably more common. Considering that, Clara really did understand us lowly commoners well.

“Excuse me,” I said, “But I'm not some kind of dark lord, and I didn't rescue you because I'm interested in power.”

“But when you rescued me, you said that it would be beneficial to you...”

She was right. I had said that when we first met.

“And in fact, you're my ally while I'm negotiating with the duke, right? That is beneficial to me. And it would not be very wizardly of me to allow a child to be killed by her own father and brother.”

“A...child?” She raised her thin eyebrows at this, and I worried for a moment, but she let it go quickly.

“Besides the objectives that Ild just summarized for us, there are also things that I must do as a wizard. The first is to stop any potential war that the duke tries to start with Velde. Next, I would ideally like to stop the conflict with the Schultz clan. And if I were to get everything I wanted, the duke would have a change of heart and become a decent ruler...but that's probably impossible.”

“L-Likely, yes...”

I would not change my basic policy of refusing to contribute to conflicts between humans. However, the fact that a force as big as Filsand's would go to war was a significant factor hindering humans in

their fight with the daemons. So it wouldn't be out of line for a wizard to stop such a thing. Or at least, I thought that line of reasoning would fly...

"Even so, the reason the duke is attacking the Schultz clan is because he needs land, right?" Ted asked.

"If the economy is doing well, then the population continues to increase, so they must, by necessity, also increase their farmland," Ild explained.

"Land..." I considered what Ild was saying. There just happened to be a map marked as the "Filsand Area Map" on the wall.

To the north were the Twilight Wastelands, where the undead sometimes appeared. To the west was the Iron Fan mountain range, where the dwarves resided. To the south was the Hida Plateau and the Twisted Wood. To the east was Velde territory. Filsand was blocked from all four directions.

"How about using Master Margilus's magic to, y'know, POW!" Ted suggested. "Is there no way to destroy all the undead in the Twilight Wastelands in one zap?"

"Nah, there's no spell that convenient."

"Oh, hmm..." Ted had a somewhat surprised look on his face. In a way I was happy he felt he could rely on me. But there weren't really many spells in my repertoire that were effective against the undead. Then again...

Hmm.

"Hey, everyone, listen up." I stood up straight and looked around at my friends. "I'm going to go the Twilight Wastelands now. I'm just going to conduct a small experiment, but if it goes well, then I may be able to exterminate the undead there and open it up to development."

"Wow! That's our Margilus!" Everyone got excited. I rolled my sudden idea around in my head and came up with the details for it as I explained. Luckily, everyone was on board and trusted what I had to say.

"I'm going to leave now. I'll come back by the day after tomorrow at the latest. Until then, I need Ild and Feivel to move forward with the trade talks with the duke's team. You don't need to push too hard. Clara, please have Ted and the dwarves help you keep everyone safe."

“I understand.”

“We will negotiate well.”

“Just leave it to us.”

“Aye! Us dwarves’ll protect ye, on the honor of Axeholm!”

Finally, I addressed Elisabel. “You should come up with a way to convince the duke to rethink his plans to start a war.”

“Y-yes. I’ll do my best!” The princess nodded, conviction in her scarlet eyes.

Chapter 7

THE HIDAL PLATEAU, due south of the Stalwart Castle.

It took Reyha half a day to sneak into various places in the Holy Precincts and get an idea of the situation.

Diane and the Schultz warriors were shocked by the dark elf's report.

First of all, all ten or so conjurers, including the magemaster, were daemonists. They weren't even trying to hide their shining golden eyes, a dead giveaway that they'd fallen under daemonic influence. There was no need to use the Daemon's Sight. The conjurers were forcing daemonism on all the residents. Luckily, there weren't many yet who'd been so corrupted that their eyes had turned gold. On the contrary, there were many who opposed daemonism and had been locked up in a dungeon.

"The patriarch was among the prisoners...as well as the firstborn son of the duke of Filsand."

"Even the patriarch?!" Diane and the others were stunned to learn about her father's situation. If Elisabel and Geo had been there, they would have been astonished to hear that Balzard, the firstborn son whose death was the root cause of turmoil in the House of Filsand, was actually alive.

"From what we've seen in the past, the flesh and bones of nobles make especially good offerings to the daemons. They must have been kept alive for a ceremony."

The faces of the Schultz warriors grew pale at Lade's explanation.

"My merciful lord would certainly instruct me not only to save the Schultz people, but Balzard as well. I'll release the prisoners," Reyha declared.

"We'll help, too," someone said.

"Yes, they're our people, after all." In response to Reyha, the Schultz warriors gathered around and started to discuss a plan to save the prisoners.

Then, Diane leaned in to ask Reyha, “What about my ma?! Was my ma captured, too?!”

“The patriarch’s wife, Cher, has become a daemonist, equal in rank with the magemaster. I overheard a conversation in which the magemaster referred to Cher as ‘Daemon Calix.’”

“I-It can’t be!”

Diane was at a loss for words. The warriors were outraged, too. Only Lade and Reyha remained calm.

“A Daemon Calix,” Lade mused. “That’s what they call humans who harbor a strong hatred. They groom them with an intent to have them fornicate with an Unholy Spirit.”

“Unholy Spirit?” Diane had clearly never heard of such a thing. “What happens when they’re joined with the Daemon Calix?”

“Beats me,” said Lade. “We always hunt them down before that happens.”

I returned to Bruno Village using *Teleport* and from there rode the phantom horse through the night, arriving in the Twilight Wastelands by morning. *Teleport* is a convenient spell that can transport you over long distances in an instant, but the magician has to know the location already. There is also a significant probability that it can fail, so I only use it in emergencies. This was one of those emergencies, so when I was done, I planned to return directly to my guest room at the Stalwart Castle.

I thought the wastelands would be creepier, but I honestly couldn’t really tell the difference between them and ordinary wilderness. I used *Analyze*, but I didn’t really sense any evil forces. I felt relieved that it wasn’t a case in which the land itself was contaminated by something. In this state, my idea might just work.

In order to check it out further, I wandered around on the phantom horse. I saw promising sights a few times, but none of them were quite right for what I had in mind. I was beginning to think that this might be harder than I thought, but after flying around for a few hours, I got lucky and found the perfect test subject. I immediately flew

directly over it on the phantom horse.

Creeeaaak!

Its rusted skeleton echoed in the empty wilderness. There was a pale aura surrounding it. The undead's body armor and the sword and spear in its hands looked like high-class weapons, so it must have once been a high-ranking soldier of some company or another. Behind him (or at least I think it was a him), there were dozens of lower-ranked soldiers armed with spears and clubs. While they seemed a bit clumsy, they were in a clear formation of two rows.

My goal had been simple: a relatively powerful undead monster who could command lower-ranked undead. *Yes, this is ideal.*

If you think about it, it's kind of pitiful, being forced to march on even after death...

It was also pretty wretched of me to use the pitiful walking dead for my own purposes, but I decided to brush that out of my mind, if it meant helping humans who were still living. *I'll arrange a service for you later, so you can move on.*

Just as I wondered if they would notice that a living person was flying above their heads, these death soldiers looked up at me. Deep in the dark eye sockets of their skulls were eerie, blinking red dots.

Creeeaaak...

"Be at rest...but stay with me a little longer. As a consequence of this spell..."

A few hours later...

My experiment using the *Control Undead* spell was a huge success. Phew.

Once night fell, Lade, Diane, and the Schultz warriors began their infiltration of the Holy Precincts. Reyha's recon work revealed that worship was held in the temple at night, and the main daemonist participants, such as the magemaster, would gather there. At first, Lade had planned to infiltrate the Precincts on his own, but the panicked Diane insisted on joining him with half of her soldiers. The remaining

soldiers and Diane's lieutenant went to rescue the prisoners, led by Reyha.

The warmaster barged in with a ghastly look on her face, unbefitting the daughter of the clan's patriarch. None of their clanspeople stood in their way to keep them from entering the Holy Precincts. Even when they came across the rare person blocking them, every one of them had eyes that glowed gold, so Lade cut them down without a word.

The temple was illuminated with the flickering of countless flames.

"P-Princess..."

"Why in the world are the warmaster and her warriors—"

"D-did you come to punish us?"

"That huge warrior! He's from the warrior clan!"

"Are you here to hunt the magemaster and daemonists?"

The Schultz clan members who'd gathered for worship were divided into the left and right sides of the room. In the eyes of those who let Diane and Lade pass, she could see guilt, fear...and hope.

Diane gritted her teeth. "Ma! Magemaster! How could you?!"

Cher, the magemaster, the conjurers, and countless daemonists stood in front of an altar placed in the center of the temple.

"Diane?" Cher asked vacantly. Her eyes were a cloudy gold, and her mouth hung open. She was unquestionably already a daemonist, no longer herself. The altar she was leaning against had been built with a random combination of daemon, human, and beast bones. It was a pattern of pure hatred.

Diane didn't know it at the time, but that altar was the Unholy Spirit. It was essentially the same as the altar Baron Corbal of Relis City had tried to make.

"Ma! What the hell's going on here?! Why are there daemonists terrorizing the Holy Precincts?!" There was fury in Diane's red eyes as she shouted.

But then she realized that aside from the magemaster and conjurers, most of the daemonists were foreigners. There were very few Schultz clan members in their ranks. This provided a grain of relief in

the corner of her mind.

“He would even come here...to our place of worship...to disturb our ambition. That accursed magus...Margilus...!”

It wasn't the hollow-eyed Cher, but the magemaster who responded to Diane's words. However, it wasn't the justification she expected. It was true that the adjutant had also known his name. But how did the magemaster already know that Diane and Lade were connected to Geo?

“First Relis City, and now here! He must be the King of Daemons! It is just as was foretold: Margilus is the true demon! He is the natural enemy of the daemons we worship!”

“And we are *your* natural enemies.”

“Huh?!”

Lade. He was the strongest warrior in the entire history of a clan who'd hunted daemons for five hundred years.

He prioritized this mission above all other things in life. He had no intention of giving audience to the magemaster's screams. His greatsword swung in a smooth, mighty arc.

WHOOSH!

“Aaaagh!”

“Huh?!”

“Protect your heads...! Arrrrgh!”

The daemonists who stood beside the magemaster were quicker than their leader. They stood in front of him, in order to deflect the steel storm with their bodies. Naturally, they were rapidly cut in two. Their severed pieces flew every which way.

“Get in there! Capture my Ma—and kill the rest!”

“Yeah!”

“Hyah!”

Diane hesitated, but then she made a decision. Barking commands to her warriors, she pulled forth her rainbow-colored blade. The warriors, previously gone pale at the sight of their transformed hometown, were now overflowing with the will to fight. They drew their spears and axes and attacked the daemonists.

“Protect the Daemon Calix and the Unholy Spirit! She is the one who will open the Epicenter! The time of the great brood is upon us!”

“Gruh... Graaah!”

“Shwaaa!”

“E-EEK!”

“M-monster!”

At the command of the magemaster, the daemonists started to transform. They were the leeches Lade had spoken of before. Some saw their arms contort and harden into the shape of blades, like the long fangs of some profane beast, their entire bodies covered with natural stone armor. Some shot a corrosive, poisonous spit from their mouths. If Geo had seen this, he might have uttered something like, “This game just changed genres.” Of course, to the Schultz clan, it was like a monster from another dimension.

The residents could only look on in terror, dreading whatever came next. Some screamed and tried to run away.

“This way!”

“D-did we make it?”

As the commotion started in the temple, Reyha led several warriors in an attack on the dungeon. She easily kicked down the daemonists who were on guard and freed the prisoners. The patriarch and a young man with long, blond hair—Balzard, the firstborn son of the duke of Filsand—were alive. But they showed the tell-tale signs of torture. Although weak, they were still able to walk on their own.

The battle in the temple intensified.

“Whoooo! Look out!”

“Die, monster!”

“Arrgh!”

“Eeh hee!”

The leeches were extraordinarily unnerving. But the Schultz warriors, led by Lade and Diane, didn’t hesitate. Lade brandished his

gigantic greatsword, a blade that exceeded two meters in length. Diane swung her enchanted rainbow sword, mowing down the creatures one by one.

Lade always used the same style of swordsmanship. He specialized in speed, impact, and destructive force. Any of those qualities would be frightening on their lonesome. When he combined them all together, the strength of his massive blade seemed almost infinite. Even the leeches' skin, covered in unnatural scales and stone, shredded apart like paper.

As for Diane, if Geo were to use *Sense of the Adept* to analyze her, she would probably be a Level 6 Warrior. In general, she was considerably strong, but her speed and muscular strength were lacking against monsters and nonhumans like the leeches. The fact that she could swing wildly and still cut down so many enemies was thanks to the power of her divine sword. It just needed to come in contact with its targets to kill them. The sword's power, combined with her own courage and rage, upgraded her combat ability to a level that could equal any warrior of the clan.

"Damn you! Damn you, you accursed warrior!"

After losing most of his followers, the furious magemaster screamed at Lade. But he wasn't going to stop at just screaming out abuses. When he put his hands together and pointed them at Lade's massive, blood-drenched body, they shot a toxic-looking purple light, which transformed into a giant skull, twice the size of a human, with three eye sockets.

VWOMMM...

"Erk!"

This skull was known in conjuring as an evil spirit. The spirit, an incorporeal, disembodied force, wrapped itself around Lade's massive body without suffering so much as a scratch from his blade.

Diane flicked her eyes toward him. "You okay, big guy?!"

"Haaah!" The magemaster cackled. "Yes! Evil spirit, suck his very essence dry! Leave him a dead, empty husk!"

For a moment, there was silence.

The magemaster was undoubtedly a powerful conjurer. If he used this evil spirit on a normal human, they wouldn't be able to walk, or

even move. They'd die a pitiful death within seconds.

But Lade was no normal human.

"Hrngh!"

The conjurer hesitated. "What?"

Lade kicked off the ground, still tangled up with the purple skull. Lunging, he closed the gap between him and the smirking magemaster.

It only took one swipe of his sword.

"AAAIIEEE!"

The magemaster had been cut clean in half at his waist. The severed pieces fell to the ground.

As his dreadful scream echoed in the temple, the glowing skull slowly disappeared.

My experiment in the Twilight Wastelands was a success. Once I was satisfied with the result, I used *Teleport* to return to the guest house at the Stalwart Castle. I gave my report and also asked about the state of the castle in my absence.

First, it seemed that several spies had managed to infiltrate the guesthouse. I'd expected as much. I was relieved that they'd been unable to open the windows with *Wizard Key*. After being beaten by the Invisible Demons, they all ended up running away. According to Elisabel, they were from the intelligence brigade, direct reporters to the duke and his court sorcerer.

Regarding negotiations to build a trade route, Ild and Feivel had entered into discussions with some of the duke's officials. This, too, was going smoothly.

"It seems that both the aristocratic faction and the military faction have given up on trying to assassinate us," Elisabel told me, giving a quick report on the diplomatic situation. First of all, Agveil himself, who was part of the aristocratic faction and had previously given actual assassination orders, came to the guesthouse to apologize in person. He claimed that he would lock his mother Alaine in the Filsand nunnery. According to him, she was the mastermind behind everything. He said

the duke had already agreed to this. The local nobility was in turmoil.

“My stepmother is in an awfully bad spot now, so things might work out. I mean, it seems like Agveil is realizing that he can’t hide under her skirt anymore.” Elisabel appeared more refreshed than relieved. I got the impression that the boy had been dragged along by his mother, and it would be better for him to distance himself from her a bit. But even so...

“Does he really think a simple apology would make everything better after trying to kill you...? I really don’t understand blue bloods.” As usual, Ted voiced the exact commoner’s opinion that I had in mind myself. *Do you have your own magic medal hidden up your sleeve, Ted?*

“This is what happens when powers shift,” said Elisabel. “It would be best if his intentions have truly shifted to match his words. We’ll see.”

Clara snorted. “As far as I could tell, Agveil just wanted to do something because he’s afraid of Margilus.”

Well, if our resident nobles said so, it must be true.

The other report was on the actions of the military faction. Their policy seemed to have changed to trying to invite me to their faction as Elisabel’s husband. One corner of the guest room was overflowing with their gifts (incidentally, we re-gifted Agveil’s own tokens of gratitude to everyone else that brought us packages).

“There’ve also been a great many beautiful women calling,” Ted said, somewhat envious.

“It seems they really want to entice you, Master Margilus.” Ild joined in, furrowing his brow. That was a problem. Well, as long as they didn’t intend to do us harm, I could probably just ignore them.

“And?” I asked Elisabel. “Did you think of a way to persuade the duke?”

She shifted her weight. “Yes. I will show you the final diplomatic negotiation ever executed by Elisabel Roney Filsandia.”

“Diane? Oh, Diane... Why didn’t you bring Elisabel?”

“Ma! What are you saying?! What happened to you?!”

They were in the temple, now strewn with the fallen bodies of daemonists. Actually, there was one daemonist left: Diane’s mother, Cher, wife of the patriarch. She leaned against the unsettling altar, dazed. Her golden eyes reflected nothing of reality. She wasn’t even able to hold a coherent conversation with Diane, who was shaking her shoulders and trying desperately to talk to her.

“Elisabel... If we only had the blood of a Schultz princess...it would be complete. But it’s too late now.”

“Ma... Hang on!”

“Move.”

Lade trudged toward Cher, holding his massive sword. The patriarch’s wife stroked the altar that the magemaster had called the Unholy Spirit.

Diane knew what that one word meant. She held out both arms, standing defiantly in the path of the strongest swordsman in all the warrior clan.

“Hold it, big guy! My Ma is just a little drunk, that’s all! She’s not a daemonist!”

“That’s right. I’m not a daemonist... I’m...ah, I can’t stand it anymore! It’s too much. My head, my heart...they’re going to burst with this loathsome hatred!”

Cher started writhing, screaming as her eyes glowed more and more golden. Her upper body swayed unnaturally; her grey hair started to twist and stretch of its own accord.

“Shaaaylaaa!”

“Ma?!”

“Hrngh!” Lade held his sword with the point straight forward and tried to stab Cher. Diane turned to her mother, trying to hug her. But Cher’s metamorphosis happened before either of them could reach her.

Cher’s head swelled up with such force it looked like it would explode.

She was no longer a human—she was a mass of darkness. Just before that darkness swallowed up Diane, Lade grabbed her by the back of the neck.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

Cher’s swollen head swallowed the Unholy Spirit, quivering as it grew larger. In just a few seconds, it was already the size of a bull...and soon, the size of a shed.

“So, the Daemon Calix is the Epicenter. She’s the nest.” Lade’s normally steady voice was just a little shaky.

A jet-black sphere towered over the stunned Schultz people, Diane, and Lade. On its surface, geometric lines resolved into the shape of a pupil.

It was the same as the daemon nest that Geo Margilus had destroyed, deep in the Valley of Daemons.

“What do you think, Margilus? It’s pretty good, right?”

“Mmm...”

Somehow I’d found myself observing Filsand military drills on the parade ground in front of the Stalwart Castle. I was in a magnificent command post about five meters tall. Next to me were the duke, dressed in the same black clothing he’d worn when we first met, and the pale-faced prime minister. The new captain of the guard (and former suitor) was also there. He seemed to have already recovered from losing consciousness from *Stun Lightning* and looked well. Although he did avoid making eye contact with me.

According to the prime minister, fully three thousand knights and soldiers were assembled below us, training in formation.

“It’s amazing,” I offered. “They’re extremely disciplined.”

The black army was actually moving in perfect synchronicity. They were divided into horizontal rows by brigade and changed formations from a V formation to an Λ formation based on the hand movements of the duke.

“The full military is three or four times this size. There aren’t many armies in Sedia with his level of skill or quality of armor. It’s only thanks to the prosperity of Filsand that we’re able to maintain such a fine standing force.”

“Mmm. I see.”

Rather than the militia or peasant levy one might expect from medieval Earth, the armies of Sedia were mostly composed of full-time regular soldiers—otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to keep up with the daemons. This fact held true in Filsand. Clearly the duke knew that an army this large was proof of his tremendous wealth and power.

Ahh...now I get it.

“My castle is still pretty small,” I admitted. “I certainly couldn’t field an army like this. And we don’t have that much revenue, either.”

“Heh. Well, you’ll just have to keep building up your power from now on. But you can’t do that without soldiers and cash.”

The duke was probably trying to show me that even if I had the strongest power as an individual, he was above me militarily and economically. I was well aware that I needed more than one giant mech to win a war.

“So how about it? Are you ready to team up with me yet? I aim to absorb Velde as soon as possible. After that, you can take all the lands due west and north for yourself.” He finally declared his intent to invade Velde out loud.

“So, you intend to divide the continent between us? That’s a pretty grand plan.”

“I’m itching to get started,” the duke confirmed.

“Amazing...”

Looking around, both the prime minister and the captain looked genuinely happy. I supposed that was to be expected after they’d served the duke for so long. I was starting to think that shipping his first wife off to the nunnery was part of the duke’s master plan. After all, she had strong connections to Velde, and would surely oppose his scheme.

This really was a conversation with a genuine warlord. I’d be lying if I said that being party to such a conversation didn’t excite me a bit. However, I’d already chosen my path, and it wasn’t that of a warlord, but that of a wizard.

I thought maybe I could just refuse, saying “I would never do something so foul,” or maybe, “Only pigs start wars,” but in the end, I didn’t manage anything so fancy.

“Nah. I’ll pass.”

I shook off the temptation. The former went against my policy of being seen as non-threatening by the duke. If he knew I was a good man (not that I believed myself anything so pure), then he would gladly take advantage of that. In the unlikely scenario that Mora was taken hostage... That thought scared me. And the latter...well, insults would just be stooping to the duke’s level.

“What’s wrong? You’re not scared of a battle against humans, are you?”

“No, not exactly...”

It was hard to find the right balance here.

“Anyway, let’s find a quiet place to talk.”

A “quiet place” meant that we gathered in the war room of the Stalwart Castle.

On my side were Ild, Clara, Feivel, and Elisabel. On the duke’s side were the prime minister, Agveil, and other important officials.

The official topic for discussion was the trade route. The real topic was a strategy meeting about the duke of Filsand’s invasion of Velde.

As expected, the trade talks were simple and ended quickly. It was thanks to Ild and Feivel hashing things out with the duke’s economic advisors in advance. We had already achieved one of my goals in coming here.

“Now, let’s discuss a military alliance between the duchy of Filsand and Castle Getaeus!” the prime minister said.

It’s the anti-daemon alliance, I thought, but I kept my poker face. Elisabel stood up to speak instead.

“Excuse me. I would like to address the duchy of Filsand.”

“Huh?”

Her manner of speech was that of someone visiting from outside of the duchy. The duke and his people did not look happy about it.

Just then...

“Hey!”

Clara’s high voice echoed in the room, disturbing the atmosphere. Her blue eyes were looking out the window. We all looked in that direction, too.

“An Arcane Postcard? It’s from Reyha.”

There was a fairy outside the window holding the postcard I’d sent to Reyha, with a reply on it. I forgot myself for a moment and read it over. “This is bad...”

“What’s going on?”

“What happened?”

The duke and Clara asked their questions almost in unison. I tossed the postcard to Clara and answered immediately. “Your Grace, a daemon nest has appeared in the Schultz settlement. A daemon army thousands strong has already emerged, and they’re headed north.”

“What the hell?!”

Daemons were the natural enemy of all humans. This was common sense even in Filsand. The color drained out of the duke’s face.

“I’m going to check on the situation and rescue the Schultz clan. I would like to ask you to accept refugees if necessary.”

“Those barbarians?!”

“Please.”

In the postcard, Reyha had said that it might be necessary to bring Schultz clan refugees as far as Filsand. I made my appeal with greater force than anything else I had ever said to the duke.

While the duke had a bitter look on his face, he agreed to accept temporary refugees. I asked Clara to take care of the rest and immediately flew south. Just as its name suggested, the phantom horse was a super express mode of transportation.

If I were to walk, it would normally take around three days just to get to the Schultz fortress. According to Reyha’s postcard, the daemon nest had appeared beyond the clan’s fortress, somewhere deep in the

Holy Precincts, which were now overflowing with a daemon army. Reyha, Lade, Diane, and all the Schultz clan survivors had abandoned the fort and escaped to the north. If that was the case, then I should be able to find the refugees before reaching the fortress.

After I'd flown on the phantom horse for a few hours, the sun began to set. Just then, I noticed people running for their lives on the plateau's parched land. As far as I could tell through my Telescope Lens, it was definitely the Schultz clan. Everyone seemed exhausted. *Well, that only makes sense. There's a horde of daemons chasing after them.*

"I really appreciate you coming with me. Now, take the reins."

"E-eep!"

I wasn't alone. Agveil, second son of the duke of Filsand, was riding on the phantom horse with me. When I'd started to head off alone, the duke had called out to stop me, and had asked me to take Agveil along. He'd said, "I know he doesn't have any experience." I didn't know what his true intentions were, but right now, I grateful that I had Agveil to control the horse while I chanted spells.

"Open, Gate of Magic..."

Chapter 8

AS WE APPROACHED the Schultz refugees and the pursuing daemon army, I saw a familiar figure. A strange warrior riding a phantom horse was fighting off the daemons who were chasing them.

The daemons screeched as they rushed in to attack, crushing their fallen allies. Lade fully utilized the maneuverability of the phantom horse, moving in all directions throughout the army of daemons, his massive blade cleaving left and right. All by himself, he noticeably slowed their advance.

It looks like I made it just in time...

“Greee!”

“Gi-gi-giii!”

The swarm was mostly made up of imps. They were small—only about one and a half meters tall—with pitch-black skin that looked like it had been painted on. Their large, hateful, glaring eyes simmered with golden malice. No matter how many times I saw them, they were no less horrifying. I guessed that the number of imps swinging makeshift axes, spears, stone clubs and rusty swords was somewhere between five hundred and one thousand.

They were too close to the refugees for me to use *Meteor* to blast them, and even if I could eliminate some with lower-firepower spells, it would eventually lead to casualties.

We flew right above the refugees. I saw that Reyha, Diane, and the Schultz warriors were in the back, acting as leaders.

“Reyha! Hang on just a little longer!” I called out while flying over their heads.

“Huh? Got it!” She gave me a strong, firm reply. *They did really well without me...*

“Wha?!”

At the end of the long line of Schultz clanspeople, there was one large, young white man who, like Reyha, was clearly not a member of the clan. He was carrying an elderly woman on his back and a pulling a crying child with one hand, running unsteadily.

“Ahhh!”

“Heeelllp!”

One of the daemons suddenly pounced on the young man. “Greee!” The tip of its spear possessed a dull, menacing glow.

“Oh cra—!”

“Graaah?!”

Lade leaped off of the phantom horse, and his large sword cleaved the daemon in two. Reyha wasted no time pulling its arm off the boy. “Run!”

“Ah-gaaah!”

The imps attacked the dismounted Lade like a muddy stream. There was no strategy. They all just wanted to be the first to sink their weapons into dreadful human flesh. It was this single, blind obsession that drove them.

“Gi-gyah!”

“Gurgh?!”

But the pitch-black, muddy stream was unable to touch the giant warrior. Lade stood like a boulder against the tide. He spun his gigantic sword around, and the moment any daemons got close, they were immediately cut down.



But no matter how strong he was, there was a limit to how much one human could do alone. Several hundred daemons slipped past Lade on his left and right sides and rushed the Schultz people.

But that's when the spell I'd just charged took effect.

"Graaah!"

There was a double roar that pierced our eardrums. With an explosive rumble and a blast wave that shook our bodies, two pillars of fire fell from the heavens.

"Graaah!"

"Gu-kyaaaah?!"

I'd used *Create Monster: Any* to create two large, red dragons in the sky. The pillars were their burning breath. Just as the name of the spell suggested, it allowed a magic user to make any monster they knew out of thin air. However, the total level of all monsters made could only total the level of the magician. I thought that two Level 18 dragons would be better in a situation like this than one massive dragon over Level 30. I was right.

"Grooo!"

The two dragons flew around freely, burning dozens of imps at a time with their breath. Thanks to them, the swarm of daemons was rapidly dwindling. Needless to say, I ordered them to attack, focusing on those closest to the refugees. Thus far, the refugees had remained unscathed.

They actually seemed to gain distance, while the daemons were in disarray.

I personally eliminated the daemons that were lucky enough to avoid the dragon attacks and headed toward the refugees, using *Fireball* and *Mana Bolt*.

I looked around. "Is that all of them?"

Around the time the thirty-minute *Create Monster: Any* expired, the entire daemon swarm had been burned to charcoal or cut in half. Not a single one was left. I didn't see any trace of other daemons nearby, either.

We went up next to Lade, covered in daemon blood. I dismounted the phantom horse. "Great work back there."

“I only did what I always do.”

“Owww-ow-ow-ow...”

Agveil, meanwhile, looked like he was going to be sick. Although, it wasn't like I was ungrateful to him. The entire reason I'd been able to attack the daemons from the sky was because he'd done so well controlling the phantom horse. I didn't know if flying horsemanship was exactly the kind of experience the duke had had in mind, but it was probably valuable for Agveil all the same.

When we caught up with the Schultz clan members who'd gone ahead, they were resting a little bit off the path. Actually, they were lying flat on the ground, probably collapsed from total exhaustion.

As soon as Reyha noticed us, she ran to me at incredible speed and knelt.

“My lord! Thank you so much for going to such trouble for us! This whole situation is all my fault. I should have prevented the daemon nest's emergence. If it wasn't for my failure, this legion would never have appeared.”

“It's fine, Reyha. I'm just glad you're okay. You did a great job.”

I hadn't heard the details yet, but I was glad that she and Lade were safe now. Then, I approached the Schultz clan, waving my arms so they would know I was friendly, when...

“Aaagh!”

“Beelzebub!”

“It's Beelzebub! He who calls forth dragons! Aaah!”

The refugees were mainly women and the elderly. They all prostrated themselves toward me with their foreheads to the ground.

“I'm not Beelzebub. I'm a wizard. A wizard!”

“Words alone can’t express my thanks. I can’t believe we were rescued by a true hero!”

The young man at the end of the refugee line just happened to be Balzard, firstborn son of the duke of Filsand. It seemed Diane’s team hadn’t killed him, only captured him. Could you call that coming back from the dead? Either way, it was a big deal for the family of the duke of Filsand.

“Beelzebub. Please bestow unto us, the Schultzs, people, descendants of the Divine King, your protection...” The man prostrating himself to me next to Balzard was the Schultz patriarch, Luthras.

The other Schultz people were exhausted from the flight from the daemonic legion and were lying on the ground a short distance away. Surrounding me were Lade, Reyha, Balzard, Agveil, and the patriarch.

Diane, so energetic the last time I’d seen her, was now milling about with the other refugees in a daze.

“Brother...you’re alive.”

“Agveil, I never imagined you would come for me!”

It was a reunion between brothers, one of whom was thought to have died in battle. Balzard hugged Agveil, tears in his eyes. Agveil was slender and delicate compared to his older brother’s strong build, and he had a complicated expression on his face. It must have been awkward to find his brother well after trying to assassinate his sister in order to become the sole successor.

“How are father and mother and Elisabeth?”

“I’ll...explain later.”

“I-I see. But you all must have been worried. I can’t wait to see everyone.”

“Everyone will be surprised by how thin you’ve grown.”

As far as I could tell from his tone and expression, Balzard was genuinely concerned about his family.

Could this really be the son of the duke? He probably took after his mother, the duke’s former wife who passed away. While I was thinking to myself, I noticed Agveil’s face soften as he spoke to his brother.

Perhaps Balzard was the glue that held Filsand’s ruling family together.

The people of the Schultz clan finally managed to calm down a bit. We would probably end up camping here tonight. Neither the patriarch nor Diane had any sort of plan for what to do after tomorrow. According to Reyha's report, while they'd been able to defeat the leader of the daemonists in the Holy Precincts, they'd been unable to stop Cher from morphing into a daemon nest. That daemon nest was so huge that even Lade had never seen anything like it. It had instantly generated a swarm of hundreds of daemons.

"But what is the King of Daemons? Is there someone like that controlling the daemonists from somewhere?"

That piece of information from Reyha was the most shocking detail. I didn't know what it was, but we had to defeat it... But there was something more important I had to do now.

"Before we do anything else, let's destroy the daemon nest."

"That nest must still be producing daemons. Margilus...you're the only one who has the power to destroy it."

I was silent, surprised by Lade's gentle words. He prioritized hunting daemons over everything, and he was entrusting this task to me.

"Impossible! There's no way any human can take that thing on," Diane cried out. The face of the once-fierce warmaster was now in a terrible state of despair and exhaustion. She was probably completely depleted after desperately leading the Schultz people and warriors this far, narrowly escaping death. "Unbelievable," the silver-haired girl went on, beside herself. "How could the Holy Precincts be ruled by daemonists?! And Ma... How could Ma... That..."

Both the Schultz people and the Filsanders around her looked pained by the girl's pitiful state. Me, too, of course.

"Ma didn't even see me! The only thing she could think of was her hatred for my Aunt Shayla! What have I been doing...? What have I been fighting for...?"

When Diane had left our camp before, Elisabel had prayed that Diane would be able to "protect what's important, even if it's only

important to her.” To think that it would end so badly. I wanted to do something to help her. But what could I say to a young girl that I had barely ever spoken to before?

“Fool!” It was Reyha who sharply scolded the girl lying on the ground, her voice like the crack of a whip.

“Huh?!” The girl looked up, bleary-eyed.

“Before crying and feeling sorry for yourself, you need to repent! If you hadn’t gotten in the way, Lade would have prevented the nest from forming!”

Diane whimpered.

Wasn’t this cruel? Sure, from what I heard, if Diane hadn’t defended Cher, Lade would have killed her and probably prevented Cher’s metamorphosis.

“Repent...? How? Destroy the nest? I can’t...I don’t have the strength.”

The nest I’d destroyed before had terrifyingly strong attacks. Even Lade had passed the baton to me on this one. It would be impossible for Diane to handle.

“That’s not what I’m saying. There is only one person in this world who can do that. Only the great wizard, my Orly, Geo Margilus. You will guide him to the nest in the Holy Precincts.”

“Huh?”

She was right. If the Holy Precincts were a hidden village, it would be tough for me to search for it on my own. But I’d already planned to ask Reyha to take me...

Well, she must have her reasons. It might be good to help break Diane out of her helpless and desperate state.

“Diane, will you lend me your aid?”

She didn’t answer right away. She looked up at me with her tear-stained face. Those eyes that were once so full of energy now looked dark and empty. That’s how deep her despair was.

“I will definitely destroy the nest and save the Schultz people. But I need your help.”

“Yes...” Diane looked from me to Reyha and back again. At last, she nodded weakly. “I’ll do it.”

I had Lade and Reyha continue guarding the Schultz people while Diane and I departed on the phantom horse. With the speed of my flying mount, we should be back by sunrise.

“When I was a kid, my Ma always said, ‘I was supposed to be a princess, shining in the capital of Filsand. My sister Shayla stole that from me.’ Now that I think of it, my Ma was already beyond caring about me way back then...”

“I see...”

Diane, straddling the back of the saddle on our flying phantom horse, kept on talking, pausing at times. I couldn’t think of anything to say to this girl who had just witnessed such a horrible tragedy, so I steered the phantom horse and just listened to her.

“That’s why I always wanted to take Ma back to Filsand someday...”

“Hmm...”

She was a great kid. She’d been fighting for her mother’s sake, all this time. And if it had gone this far, then that meant that the magemaster had probably gradually infected her with daemonic influence ever since the Schultz clan had been run out of Filsand. He’d then divided the warriors from the civilians, and while instigating conflict with Filsand, prepared Diane’s mother as the Daemon Calix... the Epicenter. Capturing Balzard and Elisabel was also probably part of that plan. It was just completely diabolical.

“But in the end, I wasn’t able to help her, either...”

“Then avenge her.”

“Huh?”

“We will avenge her, Diane. The daemonists are trying to create an infinite number of daemons through that daemon nest. Destroying that nest will avenge your mother. I promise you, I’ll do it. No... We’ll do it. We’ll avenge your mother together.”

Was this appropriate to say to a girl when she was so traumatized? I had no idea. But I couldn’t think of anything else.

“Old ma—Margilus? You... Ahh...!”

Diane let out a little yelp.

“It’s in the shadow of that mountain! Right behind that peak are the Holy Precincts!”

I reduced the altitude of the phantom horse as we entered the valley between the rocky mountains. The Holy Precincts were supposedly just past the valley. But...

“What the hell...”

“We’re too late...”

The valley was filled with daemons. There were imps, fiends, giants...and a massive, dark daemon that I’d never seen before. The land was flooded with them. They looked like a black, living carpet. This was easily the largest swarm of daemons that I’d ever encountered. It really was a daemoniac legion. I couldn’t count the exact number correctly, but compared to the duke’s army of three thousand that I’d seen that afternoon...there might have been twice as many.

Thanks to the cover of night, they hadn’t noticed us flying in the sky. But there was still a bigger problem.

“Even if we blow these guys away, as long as the nest is still there, they’ll keep proliferating...”

The problem was the limit of how many spells I could use per day. And I had used up a considerable number of spells fighting in the previous battle. For now, I had to prioritize destroying the nest. I followed the line of daemons, heading toward the Holy Precincts.

The Holy Precincts really were a hidden village, surround by mountains. There were daemons of all sizes overflowing into the narrow plain. Maybe around five hundred? But what stood out the most were the black spheres in the center of it all.

There were eight spheres, about ten meters in diameter each, piled up haphazardly. There was a strange pattern on their surfaces, something like an eyeball. Tentacles grew at odd angles from the spheres. The combined size of the spheres, to say nothing of the tentacles, was significantly larger than the nest I'd destroyed before. Together, they were the size of a small building.

The surfaces of the spheres rippled with the evidence of what was going on inside, as they continuously generated daemons. At this rate, it would never end.

"I-It's getting even bigger... This is impossible..."

Diane was frightened. Well, of course she was. I'm sure she didn't even realize it, but she was clinging to my back, shaking violently.

"I don't have any more *Create Monster*: Any spells charged, but it's a good thing I saved two *Meteor* shots."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Diane cocked her head at my murmuring. She was probably more surprised at my capacity to talk calmly than at what I was saying.

"We're going to avenge your mother now. Watch closely."

After letting her know what was about to happen, I stopped the phantom horse at a higher altitude and started to chant.

"Open, Gate of Magic."

The ecology (is that the right term?) of daemon nests remained almost completely unknown. But my expectation was that they could still generate daemons after suffering only partial damage. That sort of thing happens a lot in games. That meant that it was probably true in real life, too, here in this game-like world. So that meant I had to choose the biggest possible attack with the spells I had left, without hesitation.

"*Time Stop. Meteor. Meteor. Fireball. Destruction. Mana Strike.*"

After *Time Stop*, I cast five spells in a row. Fortunately, there were no critical failures.

A total of sixteen meteors, a shower of fireballs, a ball of light that obliterated matter into atoms, and a ray of energy that annihilated its target all fired in sequence. Every attack hit the daemon nest and the surrounding daemons simultaneously.

BA-BOOM BOOM BOOM!

“Whaaa?!”

A thunderous sound echoed off the surrounding mountains. It was like the heavens had broken open. Between the roaring sound and Diane’s screams, for a moment, the valley transformed into a fiery hell. Despite the massive size of the nest, not a trace of it remained. Even the stone temple had melted and collapsed. Needless to say, all the daemons, large and small, had met the same fate.

The daemon nest that had appeared in the Holy Precincts, and all of the daemons overflowing from it, had been exterminated. But there was still the issue of the countless daemons that had been born from the nest before it was destroyed. They were still alive, heading north. We checked on our way back, atop the phantom horse, and not one of the daemons seemed to have noticed that the nest was destroyed. They silently continued their northward march.

What can I do with no more attack spells left? I thought to myself. At the fort guarding the entrance to the Hidal Plateau, I’d used up all my wall spells, starting with *Wall of Force*. The monsters would probably eventually learn to climb over it, but it should at least work like a dam and slow their advance by a day or two.

The fort had long protected the Holy Precincts from Filsand. Now, it would play one last role for us.

“Diane? We’re here.”

“M-Miss Diane!”

“Hmm? Ohh...”

In the end, we didn’t get back to the Schultz camp until daybreak.

Diane was still stiff, even after the phantom horse landed on the ground. I peeled her fingers away from their tight grip on my robes as gently as I could.

That’s when she finally seemed to grow vaguely aware of what was happening. She slowly dismounted the phantom horse.

The patriarch was quick to join us. “Speak truly, Lord Margilus.

Are you not an incarnation of Beelzebub, the Schultz god of magic?"

The Filsand brothers ran up to bombard me with questions of their own. "We could see the flames erupting on the plateau from here!"

"Is it true what the dark elf said? You did that, Lord Margilus?"

"Ummm, excuse me."

I held up one hand to stop their inquiries. I told them, simply and straightforwardly, that I'd stopped the daemonic legion temporarily at the fort, buying us some time. I left Diane with the patriarch and decided to take a nap.

I hadn't slept at all since the morning before.

"Geo Margilus has a CON score of 16. Even though he's a magic user, with a Constitution that high, if he were an athlete, he could compete in national competitions."

That's how I'd explained things to my old tabletop group, a literal lifetime ago.

And compared to when I was a middle-aged office worker, one who never got enough exercise, I recovered from fatigue extremely quickly.

I woke up feeling significantly recovered after my two-hour nap. There was tea waiting for me, prepared by the Schultz people. But judging from their attitude toward me, it might be more accurate to say that I'd received an offering from them.

"This is awfully good," I said.

The small pieces of dried fruit brought to me by a Schultz woman were even better than I'd expected.

"It is the candied fruit of Lutz," she told me reverently. "It is not worthy of the great Beelzebub, but I am glad that you enjoy it."

The brown color wasn't very appetizing, but there was a nice chewy texture similar to that of figs, and I liked the sweet flavor that numbed my tongue. This place was dry, and the sun was beating down on us, so I probably needed a high-calorie snack about now. It also went

well with the horribly bitter Schultz tea.

“And...are you really going to take them to Filsand?” Agveil suddenly asked me, frowning a bit as he chewed on a mouthful of Lutz fruit.

“There’s no other choice. It is impossible for them to live on their own. And I have the perfect spell for transporting them.”

“That’s not the issue.”

This was the perfect situation for *Forced March*. I’d answered confidently, but Agveil shook his head with a bitter look on his face.

“What is it?”

“He’s right. For now, we need to get everyone back to Filsand and ensure their safety,” Balzard piped in.

“Hmph.” His younger brother snorted at that. “May I speak freely, Lord Margilus? I’ll say this to you first...because I don’t want to become your enemy.”

“Hmm?”

Agveil, still crouching on the ground, looked up at me with his dark eyes and continued, “First of all, you and my brother don’t understand the deep hatred between Filsand and the Schultz clan.”

“That’s not—”

“Brother, what did you see in their base? There is no one, Filsand or Schultz, who is as good-hearted a person as you, Brother.”

“Er...”

The sharp voice and accusing eyes left Balzard at a loss for words. The sad expression on his face implied that deep down, he thought his brother was right.

“Look closely at the eyes of those lying flat on the ground before you. They became strong because they were chased from their homes and forced to live in deprivation. Didn’t you start to understand that feeling when you were taken prisoner by them?”

Balzard stayed quiet.

I did, too.

I couldn't fully appreciate the depth of hatred and resentment held by the Schultz clan. I peered at the exhausted refugees from a distance. I thought it was natural that the mood was dark, since they'd had to run for their lives from a swarm of daemons. I hadn't imagined that they harbored such a deep hatred in their hearts.

"Perhaps some will submit to life in Filsand if it means saving their lives. But there are definitely some who, once they are within the city border, will be willing to sacrifice their lives just to get some payback for their grudge. Isn't that right?" This time, Agveil looked not to his brother for confirmation, but to the patriarch.

"Yes," he admitted quietly. "There are some among us whose families were killed by Filsanders, and then were driven from their homes. It's only natural that some people would think like that... However, I plan to stop them. The Schultz people must endure. We cannot allow our line to be extinguished. Even if it means bending the knee to Darmund."

Luthras bitterly spat out that last line. It was unreasonable for the Schultz clan to have to do such a thing, and I felt pity for them. But it was the best choice we had. It was because I believed that there was someone in the Schultz clan who could make such hard, clear-headed decisions that I'd asked the duke to protect the refugees.

After hearing what Luthras had to say, Agveil sighed and turned to me. "The best way to get someone to forget a grudge is to give them a good life. We'll have to go with Plan B. Plan B is to give them hope, no matter how silly it might seem. I'm sure you can do it, Lord Margilus."

"Hope?"

I was surprised to hear the word. I never would have imagined Agveil would be the one to utter it.

"That's right. Everyone here has seen so much of your powers that they're probably tired of the spectacle. You're even more powerful than the duke of Filsand, and in my opinion, much more powerful."

"You say that, but my preference is to form a compact of equals, not a hierarchy." The anti-daemon alliance discussion was still pending.

"Nominally, that's fine, but even my father knows that you're

above him,” Agveil advised. “No one will argue if you tell the Schultz clan that you are the one dictating terms.”

Balzard agreed. “I have a hard time believing that anyone in this land is equal to someone who controls dragons and takes down an entire daemonic legion alone. Even if it wasn’t their main army, it’s incredible.”

“Definitely...” Luthras agreed with Agveil’s point, too.

They were right, if we were only discussing power. And the duke especially was someone who based his ideas on power. I wondered if I would be able to get him to listen to me before he realized that my true form was that of a coward with no stomach for smiting people I didn’t like.

“Let’s say that’s true. Is that the wish of the Schultz people?”

This time, Balzard answered my question. “What my brother is trying to say is that if the order to go to Filsand comes from you, Lord Margilus, the Schultz people will listen... Though it would be better if there was some sort of reward for them to look forward to after all of this is over.”

“Mmmm.”

So, if they were confident that they would be able to eventually resolve the anxiety and unease ruling their daily lives, they could temporarily endure their suffering. That didn’t mean that their grudges would disappear completely, but there was something to what he was saying.

“If Beelzebu—or rather, if Lord Margilus is on our side, my true hope...is that you will drive Darmund out and take Filsand back for us. However...” The deep lines in Luthras’s face distorted further. He continued, “If that is not possible...at the very least, I want to make sure my people are no longer pursued by daemons and soldiers.”

I was silent.

Luthras’s words held an important nuance. He said that he wanted his people to be safe—but not that he expected me to ensure their safety. If that was the case, then that meant I was under no obligation to save them, but they would gladly cooperate to achieve our mutual goals.

“Everyone who fights daemons is my ally. If you will help as much

as you can with the diplomatic battle to come, I will make sure that the duke of Filsand never touches the Schultz people again. Of course, the condition is that the Schultz clan must likewise suppress their hatred and forswear further reprisals.”

“If you can make good on your promise, we can endure those terms.”

“Now, while I will have to seek the opinion of the others, I do have a plan. If things go well, I think I will be able to provide the Schultz clan with new land.”

“A-are you being serious?” the patriarch swallowed audibly, looking up at me with doubt in his eyes, but I could also see a glimmer of hope.

Once we had an idea of our policy moving forward, I stood in front of the Schultz clan.

If we took too much time, the daemonic legion would break through the fort and catch up to us.

“People of the Schultz clan. Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am the Great Wizard Geo Margilus.”

“Beelzebub...”

“Please save us...”

The refugees, covered in mud and dirt—mostly the elderly, injured, women, and children—were prostrating themselves before me in a wave, like some kind of involuntary reaction. I think I heard once that the population of the Schultz clan was about three thousand. Only a mere one thousand had escaped the Holy Precincts and then the fort, surviving all the way to where we were now.

That meant their population had been suddenly cut to one-third its prior numbers. I didn’t want to let them face anymore hardship.

A short distance away, the silver-haired warrior, Diane, was staring at us.

I raised my voice to address them all. “As you have seen, I am here to protect this world from daemons. Now is the time to strike

down the ones that have threatened you.”

A child started cheering. The expressions on the adults’ faces brightened, too.

“But I am not arrogant enough to save the proud Schultz people while asking nothing of them in kind. I am going to take you to Filsand now. I want you to settle there until this daemonic legion is annihilated. Rest assured: I will make certain that the duke of Filsand does not lay a finger on any of you.”

They were silent.

The faces of the Schultz people hardened, as if in disbelief that I could suggest such a thing. I saw the mother of the child who’d called out cover his mouth.

“After the daemonic legion is defeated, I vow to help you get land of your own. A place where you can build a safe haven! If you would like to return to the Holy Precincts and the fort, you will be welcome to. And you will likewise be welcome to develop your new home near my castle. Either way, if you are ever threatened by an outside enemy again, that enemy will be my enemy as well!”

“N-new land...?”

“If Beelzebub will protect us...”

“In exchange, I would like to ask all of you to support my battle with the daemons. If you can fight, pick up your sword. If you can work, lend your skills and labor. If you can do neither, pray. Once you have rebuilt your lives, if you are willing, help me protect Sedia from the daemons!”

There was no response.

After I was done saying everything I had to say, I looked around at the crowd, staring at me.

Just as Patriarch Luthras had said, if I really was their ally, I should be driving away the duke of Filsand and his people. So in a way, I was taking advantage of their weaknesses...but unfortunately, this was the only way I could think of to help them without compromising their pride.

Now the Schultz people were looking at each other and whispering among themselves. In their faces I could see hope, uncertainty, and doubt. They were all experiencing a wide range of

emotions.

“Wizard Margilus! I will consent to your terms!”

A commanding voice that could bring anyone to attention broke the silence. The warmaster raised her sword, agleam with its rainbow aura, and looked over her people. Reyha sat behind her. Had she said something to Diane?

“If you will guarantee the safety of the Schultz clan, then I offer my sword and life to you! Know that I do not give the skill and divine sword of the warmaster lightly!”

Just like her cousin Elisabeth, her normally adorable face was pale, and I couldn’t read her true thoughts. But why should I doubt a girl whose hometown had been trampled and who’d risen from the despair of her mother’s betrayal to stand firm once again?

“Your sword is welcome, princess of the Schultz.”

“I-I will fight alongside the princess for you, Lord Margilus.”

“As long as I can kill daemons.”

“Me, too...”

The few remaining warriors stood up one after another. The women and elderly lifted their heads and turned their willing eyes toward me.

In a way, this was a deception, a misdirection to paper over the discord between the Schultz and the duke of Filsand. But neither I nor they had any room to do otherwise.

“I hear you! From this day on, the Schultz clan is hereby an ally of the wizard, Geo Margilus! Let’s fight together!”

“Raaah!”

“Hurrah!”

“Margilus! Margilus!”

“Long live Diane!”

As I often did, I felt a sense of guilt as I checked off one more job from my wizardly to-do list. But my next task was the most important: to annihilate the daemoniac legion, just as I had vowed to do.

As planned, I used *Forced March* to transport the refugees to Filsand—although Lade, Reyha, Diane, and I went ahead on the backs

of phantom horses. After that, I left the Schultz clan in the hands of Ild and Clara (before that, I naturally strongly warned the duke that he wasn't to touch them) and immediately started preparations to fight the daemonic legion.

According to the reconnaissance of Reyha and Filsand, the main daemonic legion was heading straight for Filsand. They would reach it within three days. That was plenty of time...

Chapter 9

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since “The Great Wizard Geo Margilus” had led the Shultz clan to Filsand.

Nathan Cer Ladell, court sorcerer of the duchy of Filsand, was a gifted alumnus of the Academy of Sorcery in Shrendal. He was revered as one of the top ten graduates in terms of his ability to use high-level sorcery.

He’d been blessed with the opportunity, ten years prior, to serve in Filsand, and he had continued improving his skills ever since, recording many achievements in battle against daemons and barbarians alike.

Today, this battle-hardened sorcerer was in the command post above the main gate of Filsand. He looked southward from the top of the nearly twenty-meter-tall main gate. He could see the distorted formation of the swarming legion that covered the dry earth, creeping inevitably closer to his position.

Needless to say, the legion that filled his entire field of view was composed entirely of daemons. The daemonic legion had arrived, as unavoidable as the tides. According to the report from the recon team, there were ten thousand of them.

Directly below the main gate, in front of the moat that surrounded the city, the Filsand knights and army stood assembled in formation. Even after spending three days gathering all forces in the vicinity, they hadn’t been able to muster even five thousand.

The Filsand troops were elites. Five thousand would be more than enough if they were fighting humans, for example the Schultz clan or the Seisosand. However, this number would barely stand a chance against the overwhelming daemonic legion.

The legion was roughly made up of eight thousand imps, two thousand fiends, and fifty giants. Worse, there was a new type of massive daemon, many times larger than a giant. This might not quite have qualified as a brood event, as had happened twice in history, but it was on a scale that could easily destroy a nation.

“Now then,” the duke intoned. “The rest is up to you.”

“Leave everything to me.”

The duke of Filsand, dressed in black, sat on his throne in the center of the command post. Standing next to him was the person that Nathan feared above all others: the Great Wizard Geo Margilus. The sons of the duke would normally have been here as well, but they’d worked themselves to the point of passing out, and were now recuperating in the castle.

What he’d meant by “up to you” was that in return for the protection of the beleaguered Schultz refugees, Geo had promised he would destroy the approaching daemonic legion on his own.

It’s completely impossible! I have no idea what the mechanism behind his magic is, but the sheer number! No number of dragons or meteors can defeat that many!

Although Nathan had already seen Geo’s magic up close, he thoroughly doubted his ability to keep this promise. In other words, Nathan’s deep knowledge as a sorcerer prevented him from trusting Margilus. It wasn’t only Nathan. The prime minister, the captain of the duke’s guard, and the other officials in the command post above the main gate were thinking the same thing.

But there were some present who trusted him.

“Be careful,” Elisabel whispered.

“Are you sure you don’t need my help?” Diane asked.

“Yes,” Geo insisted. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

Two beautiful girls, the spitting image of each other, both gave their own caring send-off to Margilus. “Good luck.”

“We’re all counting on you.” The third woman in the room graciously bowed to Margilus.

Even Nathan knew the name of the sorceress Clara. What surprised him was that she put her hands together on her chest before bowing. That stance was called the Sacred Bow among sorcerers, and it was etiquette used to express the utmost respect for archmages and high elders.

According to reports from Nathan’s subordinates, this sorceress was from a high-ranking noble family in Shrendal, and thus she was also highly ranked in the Sorcerers’ Guild of Relis City. Such a beautiful, capable woman from a respected family—really, she looked so delicious

he could slurp her right up—did not exist in the Filsand court.

And the subject of this beautiful, top-ranked woman's gesture of gratitude and respect...was not Nathan. That wizard...to blatantly allow such a beautiful woman to pay homage to him in a way that made her look like a servant... *What an egregious man...*

After their earlier duel, Nathan had been forced to face the infuriating fact that the wizard's power clearly exceeded his capacity as court sorcerer. Moreover, he got the sinking feeling that he was also a lesser man than Margilus, and Nathan couldn't hold back his intense jealousy.

"Hey. What's wrong?" The duke suspiciously asked Nathan, eyeing his sour look.

"Huh?! F-forgive me, my lord."

"Just because we're letting Margilus carry the torch here doesn't mean it's time to slack off. As a sorcerer, you should be burning Lord Margilus's magic into your brain."

"Ha ha..." Nathan broke out in a cold sweat and bowed to the duke. He looked back out at the daemonic legion. Even in the pitch-black army, one massive figure stood out. It was the supermassive daemon that the recon team had reported.

What the hell am I thinking... This unprecedented threat is almost on top of us, and I'm feeling jealous about a woman...?

"Phantom Horse." Seizing Nathan's confusion as an opportunity, Geo chanted his spell and conjured up his jet-black horse. The duke's guards and officials chattered quietly to each other.

But then again...I was able to forget my fear—no, I was able to forget daemons even existed, if only for a moment.

"Now, you all wait here. I'll take care of this."

It was because of that man. It was because I felt confident, knowing that this man is our ally.

Nathan silently watched the wizard straddle the black horse and fly away into the sky.

“H-hey, they’ll b-be here s-soon.” Vike, a spear-wielding soldier of the Filsand infantry, spoke in a shaky voice to Bond, another soldier in their line.

“G-g-gotcha,” Bond replied.

They’d joined the army three years earlier and had had the bad luck to be stationed on the front line of today’s three thousand-soldier infantry unit formation. They had battle experience, and they made a reasonable salary, which kept their families comfortable. There was no thought in their mind of running away.

Even so, they couldn’t ignore their fear. The spectacle of a black wall rushing at them was what nightmares were made of.

“What the hell is that? That huge thing?! It’s bigger than the statue of the duke in the town square!”

In fact, it would have *dwarfed* the statue of the duke that had long stood over Filsand’s central green. Even within the black wall of daemons, its massive figure towered high above, higher than the city walls.

Its legs were thick and stout, its arms long and muscular. It stayed hunched over, and mostly walked on all fours. Its movements were slow and labored, like those of giant, but if it made it all the way to them, it could easily destroy the city walls.

It may be easy to forget because of the distraction of the supermassive daemon, but there were also fifty giants, each half as tall as the city’s defenses, and over two thousand fiends, each with the fighting power of twenty human soldiers.

“Are you really, really sure it’s going to be okay? One time, I watched half my squadron get crushed by a single fiend,” Bond worried.

“Th-the duke is watching... I-I’m sure it’s fine...probably,” Vike tried to reassure him, but he wasn’t so sure himself. Going off how their commanding officer had explained things to them before the battle, the duke’s guest, the “amazing sorcerer,” would defeat most of the daemonic legion. The job of the army was to take care of any stray daemons and ensure that none managed to get away.

“L-Look, that sorcerer who summoned the dragon to the castle is about to do something, right?!”

“Yeah. Probably...”

Rumor had it that Elisabeth's fiancé had summoned a dragon to his duel with the court sorcerer and the captain of the duke's guard. It had been spreading far and wide among the Filsand people.

There's no way he's there. What if the duke in the command post is a fake, and we're stuck here...?

"Raaargh!"

Vike's thoughts were interrupted by not only the air, but even the ground shaking at the supermassive daemon's roar.

"Reeee!"

"Gyaaah!"

"Gra-gaaah!"

"Skreee!"

The daemoniac legion cried out in hatred, as if joining in chorus with the supermassive daemon's roar. An infinite number of lights started shining within the black wall formation. Vike knew instinctively that those were the eyes of the daemons.

The supermassive daemon stretched its long arms high. The moment it dropped them in the direction of Filsand, countless murderous daemons would probably begin their attack.

"Th-they're coming."

"L-Let's kill 'em!"

"We won't just lie down and die."

Anyone living in the duchy of Filsand would candidly admit that the duke that ruled them was an evil villain. However, it was obvious in the do-or-die expressions of the soldiers like Vike that the Filsand infantry weren't outlaws. They were soldiers. Almost reflexively, they reached for their spears.

Just then...

Vike caught sight of some sort of white, glowing masses passing over their heads, which left eight trails behind.

There was a *pyoom* sound, like the rushing of a powerful wind, as the trails flew by.

The eight streaks of light pierced the heart of the daemoniac legion, centered on the supermassive daemon.

And then Vike couldn't see anything but a wall of white.

BA-GOOM!

“Whooooa!”

“Eeeek!”

From the command post, the court sorcerer Nathan could clearly see the eight meteors rain down on the center of the daemonic legion.

Eight giant fireballs were generated in the spots where the meteors fell. The command post was drowned in the roars of impact. The command post, situated high above the robust main gate, shook violently while Nathan and the other officials struggled to keep their balance.

“S-so those are Margilus’s meteors...” It was rare for the cool-as-ice duke of Filsand’s voice to waver. But in this case, Nathan thought it was amazing he managed not to scream. The only one with a calm look on her face was the sorceress from the wizard’s entourage.

“L-Look. The massive daemon...”

“What incredible sorcery...”

Even without the commentary by the officials and duke’s guard, everyone could see it for themselves. The enormous body of the supermassive daemon that was approaching the main gate had been cut nearly in two. Its torso rolled back from the point of impact. There were a number of holes in the swarm of daemons that had covered the earth moments ago, craters present where monsters once had stood.

“W-wizardry. Can magic do this much...?” Nathan murmured, trembling with fear.

He had experienced the terror of Geo’s dragon firsthand. He remembered being startled and frightened at that time, but it was nothing compared to the shock he felt this time. It wasn’t just the sheer strength of the spells that impressed him, as it did the duke and his officers. They’d told Nathan he was gifted at the Academy of Sorcery. For a while, he’d believed he was one of the greatest magical talents in the world. He could fully appreciate now the sheer breadth of

Margilus's wizardry. Geo wasn't just some one-trick pony who could summon dragons, but instead possessed a variety of terrifying techniques.

"I-I think that my best fire-elemental spell would only manage half the power of one of his meteors...and it would use up almost all my mana in a single go..." As a sorcerer, he couldn't help but think in terms of comparison with his own sorcery.

Sorcery was normally activated by consuming mana. For example, the mana capacity on Nathan's sorcery frame would be reckoned at 522 mana points. That meant he was in the top percentile of sorcerers in the world. The amount of mana consumed by his strongest sorcery skill, *Valvord Galeiza*—the Arcane Thunder Spear—was about 300 MP. In other words, using *Valvord Galeiza* would make his MP drop from 522 to 222. That meant that he could only use two or maybe three medium-ranked sorceries thereafter.

And judging by what he'd just seen, his highest-ranked sorcery wouldn't be even half as powerful as *Meteor*. (Though to assuage his ego, Nathan reminded himself that his *Valvord Galeiza* was powerful enough to kill a gigant in a single blow). If he wanted to pull off the same effect as what Geo had just done, he would need MP of at least 4,800.

"I just...can't believe that one human could have almost 5,000 MP." Even the most powerful sorcerer Nathan knew, the grandmaster of the Sorcerers' Guild, probably only had 1,000 MP. Nathan shook his head, defeated by the out-of-this-world abilities of someone he had once foolishly challenged to a duel.

"Hey, the giant daemon!"

"It's moving... D-did it regenerate?!"

"And there are still daemons left... A lot of the gigants survived."

"Now we'll see how long the knights and infantry can fight them off..."

The internal organs of the knocked-down supermassive daemon were spilling out, and they could see its red muscles swelling. It didn't quite happen in a flash, but there was new flesh growing steadily. Given a few hours, it might completely regenerate.

Furthermore, while the meteors' force was amazing, it just wasn't

enough to defeat ten thousand daemons. It was only effective in defeating or incapacitating about two thousand. The remaining daemons were unscathed, and after about ten seconds of confusion from the impact of the meteors, they were fully recovered. Even daemons with injuries that would have rendered human soldiers immobile dragged their bodies onward, heading for the Filsand army that was guarding the castle gate.

I could do something about that giant with my sorcery... if the remaining sorcerers and soldiers could just hold them off... No, impossible. There's no winning this!

Nathan screamed silently, within his heart.

Pyoom!

Eight more meteors passed overhead and dropped onto the daemonic legion.

“Whaa?!”

“Aaagh!”

Not even thirty seconds had passed since the first attack. The exact same scene of eight fireballs burning up the daemonic legion repeated itself right before the human soldiers' eyes.

The difference this time was the number of surviving daemons. The supermassive daemon that had started regenerating had now disappeared without a trace. Half of the giants—some twenty-five or so—were also gone. Even more of the imp and fiend brigades had vanished, too.

“I-I-Impossible! It's impossible!”

Nathan's apprentice watched him hold his head and cry out.

The other sorcerers and the duke's guard were in the same state. The officials who were not familiar with sorcery or battle were simply happy to see things go their way.

“This means that he must have at least 10,000 MP,” Nathan's apprentice gasped. “Surely that can't be possible!”

“I-If Lord Margilus wanted, he could easily destroy this Stalwart Castle,” another sorcerer murmured.

“A single castle? No, he could obliterate an entire country...”

There was silence.

Nathan wanted to rant and rave like his subordinates. But his sense of responsibility as the court sorcerer forced him to think rationally, if only barely.

I have no choice but to admit it. This is something completely different from sorcery. Is it even magic? It is some sort of artifice or thaumaturgy based on a different principle than mana?

Nathan had been able to sense mana as far back as he could remember, and he'd grown aware of his sorcery frame as soon as he started training. The conclusion this exceptional man came to was that Margilus was such an anomaly that he didn't even walk on the same earth as the rest of them.

"M-m-more meteors!"

Just when it seemed Nathan would completely lose himself in his thoughts, a third round of meteors flew overhead.

"N-nothing could surprise me now..."

The court sorcerer did everything he could to maintain his honor. Ten seconds later, when the fourth round of meteors flew in, all he could do was laugh.

But ten seconds after that, he would take back his comment about not being surprised.

"Wh-what...? Is this a dream?!"

"What kind of lousy dream would this be?!"

Vike shouted along with Bond, who was lying on the ground next to him. The soldiers' ears were ringing like crazy after the fourth round of meteors, and they couldn't hear each other without shouting.

Until a few minutes ago, they'd been prepared to be swallowed up by the black tide of the daemonic legion and die. Now, it was the corpses of daemons that filled the land. But upon closer inspection, about half of the imps and fiends were still moving. Most of them were badly injured, but their instinctive hate for human beings was clearly still intact.

Now that they had time to think things through, the soldiers could

see this was still a critical situation. However, the repeated baffling events left their senses numb.

“Was that...? That monster did all that, right?”

“Don’t call him a monster! What if he heard you?!”

Vike was looking up at the small, faraway figure of a man straddling a black horse in the sky. To Vike and Bond, his existence was completely unfathomable. The only sorcery they had seen were flame arrows and wind blades that could kill one human at a time. Vike shoved at Bond—who’d called that man a monster—without hesitating. It was only natural to be afraid. What if that man suddenly changed the aim of his meteors to rain on their heads?

“Ah... The daemons are still coming! All troops stand ready. We repel them here!”

They heard the orders from the commander behind them.

That was when they realized there were still four or five thousand daemons right in front of them. The power of the meteors was amazing, but as the daemoniac legion had spread out, their own concentrated force had grown less effective. The commander’s anticipation of battle was reasonable. Vike and the other soldiers desperately pulled their shaking bodies to their feet.

“O-okay, everyone. They’re already reeling! All we have to do is finish them off.”

“Yeah! Easy work!”

Vike and the other soldiers knew this was just bravado.

“Gii-shaaah!”

“Greee!”

“Go-gaaah!”

The legion was now a mere fifty meters from the Filsand infantry. They readied their spears.

Just then...

BWOOOOOSH!

A wall appeared in front of Vike’s eyes. The soldiers lost their footing at the sudden impact. The wall had fallen out of the sky to strike the earth.

“Wh-what the hell is this?!”

“Whaaa?!”

“D-did the daemons do this?!”

After falling back on their butts, Vike and Bolt looked up to inspect the wall, but what they saw was a huge warrior clad in thick armor. What they’d thought was a wall was actually its leg.

“A g-g-giant?!”

From high atop his phantom horse, Margilus had created three forest giants using the *Create Monster: Any* spell. The giants were lined up in a row, as if to make a wall between the Filsand main gate and the daemonic legion.

“Th-these are from that mon...no, from Margilus. Did Geo Margilus make these with his sorcery?!”

“P-probably... I think so...”

“What are they holding...?”

“Hey, could it be...?”

The three giants were armed, but they weren’t holding weapons. They carried bundles of long sticks with thin ends. In other words: brooms.

“Hm...”

Swoosh!

The giants moved in unison, like a reflection across three mirrors. The target of their “sweeping” was naturally the daemons.

“Wha?!”

“Eeep!”

If the movements of the giants were as slow and labored as their appearance suggested, some of the daemons, burning with unyielding hate, might have reached Vike and the other soldiers. However, the giants were able to shift their weight and change positions quite nimbly. They swiftly moved their brooms back and forth, creating a turbulent airflow that would easily send a child flying.

They were lined up alongside each other, establishing a line of defense to protect the Filsand army and the city behind them...but only a few calm people realized that.

They sweep the same way my mom does...

Still sprawled on his backside, Vike absentmindedly watched the giants. How long had it been since he'd last visited his mother, anyway?

"Giaaah?!"

"Ga-hii!"

The swept-up daemons suffered a far worse fate than being knocked onto their backs. Some flew dozens of meters away, some were crushed between a broom and the ground, and some were skewered by the branches. Vike was grateful that the storm of kicked-up dust made it hard to see anything.

"It's happening again."

"How many are there...?"

While the soldiers remained stunned, watching the daemons get swept up by the giants, the ground beneath them shook again and again. Each time, three more giants appeared to join the line of defense. In the end, there were a total of twenty-seven giants. They were all lined up in a row and kept on using their giant brooms to sweep away the daemons. With so many giants in the way, the soldiers couldn't even see the enemy legion anymore.

"Gi-gyaah!"

"Greee!"

The daemons, being daemons, continued to rush into the giants' attack without fear, almost mechanically. The screeches were enough to instill fear in the soldiers, but from the perspective of the giants, they might have thought: "This dirt I have to clean up keeps jumping right into my broom."

"At this rate, do you think they'll get all the daemons?"

"W-well, maybe...though there are still a lot left."

The soldiers didn't look depressed anymore.

They now understood that the Sorcerer Margilus, who controlled the giants from above, was using unimaginable power to protect them.

"Errgh... Aaagh...!"

A sound came from the edge of the Filsand army. Brigades of battle slaves were stationed in the most vulnerable spots of their

formation. They used battered weapons, and many of them suffered from visible physical deformities. It was easy to pick them apart from the armored regulars.

Among them was the former suitor of Elisabel, an especially huge and misshapen man. Under normal circumstances, he would have let out a bloodthirsty scream and gone right at the enemies with his massive axe. Right now, he wore an expression of fear in the face of this overwhelming power. Although their positions differed drastically, the duke and his entourage felt the exact same fright as their lowliest slaves.

“There are giants there, too!”

“And over there!”

The view from the top of the main gate was quite clear. From their refuge, the duke, court sorcerer, and officials could see additional giants walking in from the horizon.

There were nine coming in from each angle, for a total of twenty-seven. They arranged themselves to form a square around the daemonic legion.

These were the giants that Geo had made with his spells the day before. Each day, Geo could use nine spells from each level. The number of forest giants he could make with *Create Monster* was three, so he could make twenty-seven each day. *Create Monster* lasted for one hour, so he used the *Infinity* spell to prolong it. *Infinity* extended the duration of the spell to twenty-four hours.

“He created more than fifty giants?” Nathan felt like nothing could surprise him at this point. “Is he an incarnation of the sorcerer-god Soler? Is he really the avatar of Beelzebub, like the Schultz say?”

“I can’t believe I dueled with such a monster...”

Both the court sorcerer and the captain of the duke’s guard were on the verge of passing out from shock.

“Amazing... There are no words...”

“Wow, wow, wow...”

The two beautiful, red-eyed girls with matching faces had started holding hands at some point, and were just staring at Geo and his magic.

“What are those giants over there doing?” the duke asked. He’d managed to maintain his cool, albeit through thick, greasy sweat.

“If you look closer, you’ll understand right away,” Clara answered with a smile on her face.

“Huh? They...” The duke’s eyes opened wide in disbelief.

The new giants that were surrounding the daemonic legion from all sides were carrying multiple boulders in their arms. They dropped the boulders on the ground and then each selected a single one to pick up anew. The duke thought he might have seen such behavior before.

“Impossible...”

The twenty-seven new giants were all behaving in exactly the same way. After jogging a few steps, they planted one of their massive feet, swung their right arms, and then let the boulder roll, aiming for the daemonic legion.

The rocks that the eight-meter-tall forest giants sent rolling were about two meters in diameter. Any daemons who got in their way were smashed, sent flying, or were crushed into dust.

The duke struck his hand to the armrest of his throne, laughing. “They’re *bowling*?”

“What the hell... What can you do but laugh?”

“Oh, gods...”

“It’s just crazy... We’ve all gone crazy.”

By this time, Vike and the other soldiers, as well as the knights and battle slaves, were all numb to their fear. They started enjoying themselves. There were even some who felt a bit of pity for the enemy. The remaining daemons were shredded to pieces by the attacks of the giants that had appeared from each of the three sides. Those giants didn’t just bring a couple of rocks. Each time one of the twenty-seven boulders passed through the daemonic legion, their numbers decreased.

Between those who'd assaulted the giants and those who'd been crushed by boulders, fully seven or eight thousand daemons had already been reduced to piles of meat.

Somewhere along the line, with the number of living and moving daemons so drastically decreased, the effects of the giants' boulders and brooms began to wane.

"Groooooo!"

"Guh-gaah!"

This time, the sound that roared down from the heavens wasn't that of fiery rocks tearing through the atmosphere. It was a dragon.

The *Create Monster*: Any spell required for making dragons was Rank 9. In order to use *Meteor*—also a Rank 9 spell—multiple times, he had only prepared two spells for summoning dragons. Therefore, there were now six small, red dragons flying in.

"Now dragons?!"

"That's great! Burn up those daemons!"

The six dragons spewed their fiery breath, burning away the few survivors of the daemonic legion.

The scene had gone far beyond reality into the realm of fairy tales. Really, this sort of scene was too much even for a children's bedtime story. Everyone present, including Vike, prayed from the bottom of their hearts: *Let's hope the duke never makes this man angry.*

"I wonder if this is enough...?" I murmured to myself, high in the sky over Filsand on the back of a phantom horse. Below me, the giants were methodically sweeping the ground, gathering the remains of the daemons into a single pile.

The red dragons were burning the small mountain of daemon remains to dust with their fiery breath. If the massive amount of daemon corpses was left alone, they might cause illnesses or transform into undead, so we had to be thorough.

"Mm-hmm. This should be...fine. I think." Up to that point, I'd enjoyed myself a great deal. Anyone would have. I'd stood against

overwhelming odds all by my lonesome and prevailed.

But after that uplifting moment, I started imagining a number of worst-case scenarios. Looking back on what I'd done since my transition to this world at the Watcher's hands, I felt proud of my record. I'd figured things out and done pretty well. But a persistent fear had stayed with me: that somewhere along the line, I would make a huge mistake. Power like this couldn't be thrown around without consequences.

Less than an hour later, all traces of the formerly massive daemonic legion were gone, thanks to the work of the giants and dragons. Now all that was left was the crater-ridden land.

"Mmn..."

Once everything was cleaned up, I finally felt some relief. I lifted my arms to greet the Filsand army lined up in front of the city walls, and headed toward the command tower above the main gate.

"Margilus! Margilus! Hail the mighty sorcerer, Margilus!"

My phantom horse had barely even touched down in the command tower before the soldiers started raising their fists and weapons, cheering. I could correct them about my title later.

Chapter 10

“THAT WAS IMPRESSIVE, Master Margilus.”

“Mmm.”

Clara was the first to speak to me after I dismounted from the phantom horse. She normally addressed me as an equal, but in public, she spoke more formally. Nothing appealed to my pride quite like having a beautiful woman appreciate my work. I felt like I finally understood why the presidents of companies both large and small so often hired beautiful secretaries.

Meanwhile, the still-seated duke of Filsand, Elisabel, Diane, and the officials had stiff expressions on their faces for some reason. “Huh?”

“O-oh my...”

“S-somebody help me.”

When I looked over, I saw that nearly all the Filsanders were no longer able to stay upright on their feet. Only the duke seemed unperturbed. Perhaps all the stimulation was a bit much for them. Part of me thought it was silly to be scared at this point.

I addressed the duke again. “As you can see, Your Grace, the daemonic legion is no longer a problem.”

“Erm... Yes...just as we’d hoped.” The duke was uncharacteristically clumsy as he rose.

As he did, the surrounding officials, sorcerers, and knights began to kneel. Elisabel and Diane did so as well.

“You did a wonderful job. Such power...”

“Are you...sure you’re really not Beelzebub?”

“O-our hero!”

“It was like watching a myth come to life!”

I had already gotten used to such reactions. “No...definitely not Beelzebub,” I assured them.

But come to think of it, this was the first time I’d ever used so many flashy, high-level spells at once. I was already numbed to that

sensation, but the impact of today's battle would have completely surpassed what they'd experienced when I showed them the dragon before.

"Anyway, you have eliminated the crisis. Filsand will not forget this service." There was unmistakable relief on the duke's face as he wiped sweat off his brow. It was a natural reaction for the leader of a town that had just been saved, but it was the first time I really noticed human feeling in him. I could feel the heat through his gloves when he firmly shook my hand.

However...

There were still many challenges ahead, including with his children—especially Elisabel. The matter of the Schultz clan remained unsettled, to say nothing of war with Velde.

I persuaded the duke to meet with me, calling it a "victory banquet."

This meeting's purpose was to continue the previously interrupted discussions of the alliance between Castle Getaeus and the duchy of Filsand. The duke's side was calling it a military alliance, and planned to use it to invade Velde.

The attitudes of not only the duke, but also the prime minister and the court sorcerer, were intense. They wanted me to become one of them, no matter the cost.

"Let's get started then." Elisabel stood up first, facing them with a cool countenance. "I would like to address the duchy of Filsand."

This was the part where we'd been interrupted by Reyha's postcard last time.

"In addition to the trade relations that have already been agreed upon, the requests of Lord Geo Margilus to the duchy are as follows: First, conclusion of the anti-daemon alliance, in order to suppress the emergence of daemons and the secret maneuvers of the daemonists; second, a ceasefire with the Schultz clan and support for them until their lives are stable; third, development of the Twilight Wastelands as a place where refugees can live, within ten years. That is all."

There was silence.

From the duke on down, every face on their side of the table stiffened at the “requests” read to them in a lovely but clerical voice. I’d been warned to expect that, but it didn’t make things any less uncomfortable.

“You would truly make such brazenly one-sided demands?! I understand the anti-daemon alliance, but you expect us to support the Schultz clan? And develop the Twilight Wastelands with all the undead just wandering around?! You mock us...ridicule us...! I... You... I can’t...” the prime minister, red in the face, shouted until he broke off coughing. *I guess it was natural that their hackles would be raised if I made my suggestions right after showing off so many of my powers. Hmm... I really can be a loathsome sort of man.*

“My sole request is a joint attack on the prosperous east.” The duke of Filsand was clever. He stared me straight in the eye, not cowed in the least. “What say you to that?”

After being ignored, Elisabeth spoke again. “With the help of Lord Margilus, it indeed would be easy to conquer Velde. But how would you govern it?”

“Well, I would—” the duke started.

“It’s not possible.” Elisabeth cut him off. “The entire Filsand army is less than ten thousand men. Even if that were enough to rule Thanesand, do you really believe you can control the entirety of Velde?”

“Hmm...”

The duke clammed up after Elisabeth’s question. It wasn’t that the he’d given insufficient consideration to his conquest of Velde. His original plan had been to take his time, invading only one city at a time. But my powers provided numerous expedients.

“With a wizard’s help, it might be easy to *conquer* the country of Velde, but Filsand does not have the power to govern it,” Elisabeth pointed out.

In the wake of the excitement of the huge spectacle of meteors, dragons, and giants, Elisabeth’s cool tongue soothed the leaders of Filsand.

“I’m not happy to say it,” one minister muttered, “but she may be

right.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous! Just because we have Lord Margilus, that doesn’t mean we have to go trying to force the takeover of the entire realm, does it?!”

Once they’d cooled down and thought about it calmly, they began to notice the holes in Elisabeth’s opinion.

The court sorcerer offered his own take. “This is ridiculous! If you want to form a military alliance and conquer together, then you should bring an equal level of power! Are you all satisfied with only taking land that Margilus conquers for you?!”

That struck a little close to home. The minister recoiled. “Ergh!”

Elisabeth turned her scornful gaze to the duke and his officials. This type of emotional persuasion didn’t allow for a lot of calm, empathetic reasoning.

But that couldn’t be helped. I’d decided to play the role of a heroic wizard whom the evil duke should fear, and Elisabeth had set the stage admirably.

“I understand your concerns,” I said, “So I’ll be giving you two things: time and an opportunity.”

“What are you talking about?” the duke demanded.

Elisabeth made eye contact with me, and I jumped right into it. “It’s simple. I want Filsand to grow stronger. If we were to develop the Twilight Wastelands, you would be able to train more troops and build a stronger army, right? Once you do that, I will help you.”

What Elisabeth had proposed to me was a plan to buy time and have the duke concentrate on development for a decade or so. When I naturally asked her what we would do in ten years, she answered, “My father lives an unhealthier life than anyone I know. No one who lives like that could hope to see another ten years. Even if he stays healthy, ten years is plenty of time to come up with another plan.”

If I didn’t appreciate the motives behind her scheme, it would have been disingenuous for me to be involved in it. Basically, we were running a scam.

But looking at it objectively, the conditions weren’t all that bad. The duke didn’t have to declare to the world that he meant to invade Velde. Aside from supporting the Schultz clan, all the conditions were

beneficial to Filsand.

“Your offer is predicated on one big question,” the duke said. “And that is: Is it possible? I’m not unaware of the promise of the Twilight Wastelands. If we could claim their riches and develop them fully, we’d become a dominant power. If we pull that off, then I couldn’t care less about what happens to the Schultz. But tell me this, wizard. How? How are you going to get rid of the undead?”

“Well, it won’t be me, exactly. Actually, it’s already begun.”

Everyone looked at me quizzically.

I took the duke and his entourage outside of the Filsand capital. I’d already promised to show them my means for eliminating the undead from the Twilight Wastelands.

“Why the suspense?” The duke was growing more and more interested. “Just tell us already.”

“What manner of trickery is he up to now...?” the court sorcerer still looked pale in the face.

“They’re running a bit late. According to my calculations, they should be here any minute... Oh, there they are.” I squinted toward the Twilight Wastelands and saw some figures on the horizon.

“There who are?”

The number of figures grew and grew. They were coming closer at an amazing speed.

Rattle, rattle!

Rustle, rustle!

“What the hell?!”

“I-It’s the undead!”

The officials cried out in alarm. Indeed, the formation heading straight for us at terrifying speed was full of skeletons armed with rusted weapons. Among them were walking corpses with rotting flesh, and ghosts surrounded with a yellow aura.

“Wh-what is this?! Is this your doing, Margilus?!”

Even my friends, who knew what was going on, were nervous. The duke broke out into an oily sweat. After all, we were staring at a troop of about a hundred undead. As expected, the duke's guards and the court sorcerer prepared themselves for battle.

"I used a spell called *Control Undead* on one of the undead in the Twilight Wastelands. Oh, there he is."

Rattle, rattle!

The Death Knight upon whom I'd cast *Control Undead* in my earlier experiment came forward and saluted me. For some reason, it seemed more powerful than the last time I'd seen it. I had given it very specific orders: "Gather undead weaker than yourself under your command. Build an army and destroy any undead that do not obey."

I was using the undead to eliminate the undead. This was my great strategy for the Twilight Wastelands. So far, only this one Death Knight was under my command, but I could add as many as I wanted. Even if it took time, it should be possible to eventually eliminate all of the undead from the Twilight Wastelands.

Two days earlier, in order to bring them to Filsand, I'd cast the *Forced March* spell on them. I'd actually hoped to use them in the battle to defend the city, but it turned out they couldn't move quite fast enough for that. Still, the fact that I was able to show the duke and his entourage my work meant that I hadn't wasted the spell.

"Dragons, giants, now the undead..." The duke, despite the bitter expression on his face, seemed convinced.

"I just don't know anymore! This is all completely outside my expertise." The court sorcerer's eyes were wide with petulant anger.

Several days later...

In the end, the duke yielded to our requests. Elisabeth laughed at herself after hearing their decision in the guesthouse.

"That's that, then. This shall be the final official act of diplomacy of one Elisabeth Roney Filsandia, daughter of the duke. But it seems that, here at the end, he finally accepted me as his own flesh and blood."

Up to now, Elisabeth had used her rationality, goodwill, and cooperation as her greatest weapons in negotiations with other countries. That was the *motive* I spoke of before. The reason propelling Elisabeth through our sham of an offer.

She had already removed herself from Filsand. That's why, as a final farewell, she wanted to leave her mark on her father as his daughter.

Elisabeth busily prepared herbal tea and sat next to me. "Here you are."

I remembered seeing the snacks served with the tea before. "These are Lutz fruits?" I took some of the candied fruits customary among the Schultz. The taste was great. It was strong, but that went well with the bitterness of the herbal tea.

"Yes. The Schultz were kind enough to leave some with us."

She'd also gone as a liaison between Filsand and the Schultz clan. Not only that, she'd listened to the complaints and desires of the clan and mediated with the residents of Filsand.

Maybe that helped her feel some goodwill toward the Schultz.

"I see... Were they harsh toward you?"

"Of course they were. At first, they even threw stones at me." Elisabeth spoke casually, as if it was nothing.

"Good god... But things are okay now?"

"Yes. It seems they're starting to trust me."

Elisabeth had always worked as a diplomat for Filsand. Even though her mother was a Schultz princess, her people had suffered many years under Elisabeth's tyrant of a father. It wouldn't be easy to build a trusting relationship with the clan.

"I see. You did great."

"Really, talking is the only thing I know how to do..."

She had incredible diplomatic ability. More than that, I was impressed by her policy of speaking to everyone as equals.

I stroked her blonde hair without thinking. I thought she would pull away, but instead she just smiled.

"Actually, I was finally able to speak with my father last night..."

Until now, we had just been chitchatting. Now, as she prepared a second cup of herbal tea, she cut to the chase.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“I think he said more or less the same thing he told you. In the end, I was just a tool that he called his daughter.”

That damned duke. Even if he felt that way, he could at least make up a kind lie to tell his daughter. Not that I had much of a leg to stand on, considering I hadn’t figured out a single thing I could do to help bring father and daughter closer together.

“He did say one other thing...”

“Hmm?”

“He said, ‘You won the bet.’”

Ah, the bet. I remembered the duke using those words to Elisabeth before.

“I think that’s the first time my father ever said something real to me.” Elisabeth smiled again. But this time, the smile wasn’t completely happy. It was the same look she’d had when she described her birth as a “sin.” Though, on reflection...maybe it wasn’t *exactly* the same.

“What do you want to do now?” I asked her.

“I have just one thing in mind.”

There was something different about the shine in her red eyes as she stared at me.

“Will you let me help you with your work? You’ll need a diplomat, and I could manage your civil services besides.”

“Are you suggesting you leave the duke’s family and become my employee?” I knew she’d planned on leaving home, but I never imagined she would want to work for Castle Getaeus. Perhaps I should have.

“Yes. After all, I genuinely enjoy working on diplomatic missions. What could be more rewarding than forming an alliance that fights daemons?”

Diplomacy... I’d always left our diplomatic and domestic affairs to Ild.

There was a certain twinkle in her eyes. “Of course, it would be

even better if you took me as your wife.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to decline.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” She grinned mischievously.

Truthfully, the matter of our engagement hadn’t been completely settled yet. “I’d like to ask you one thing. With your abilities and contacts, you must have other options. Why’d you choose me?”

It was maybe a bit crass, but I felt the need to get right to the point. I wasn’t reckless enough to dance around the issue with a battle-hardened diplomat like her. I also thought she would be interested in my true intentions.

“Well,” she blinked, surprised. “Are you sure you’re not underestimating your influence? I want to help you turn Castle Getaeus into a continental hub.” Then she added with a sly smile, “You know, this is the first time in my life I’ve ever been able to stand up and proudly declare a dream of my own.”

I paused for a long moment. “I see.”

After overcoming the grudges against her mother and father’s scheming, she was finally able to choose her own life. And her own dream. Heavy stuff.

“Welcome to the team, Counselor.”

“It’s my pleasure, my lord.” She curtsied, lifting her skirt slightly by the hem.

Her manners were as perfect as they had been on the night of our “engagement.” The only difference was that her smile had transformed from the hollow expression of a painted doll to that of a vibrant girl.

This was the real Elisabel.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of Elisabel and Ild, and of course the patriarch, Luthras, and his daughter, Diane, the Schultz clan was finally at peace. The children were even running around joyfully.

I went with Diane to check out their camp.

“Hey, Reyha, do you think you could maybe give me some

pointers on fighting sometime?”

“If my lord permits.”

“I bet it’s fine, right, Margilus?”

Ever since the defensive battle, Diane was attached at the hip to Reyha and me. Reyha was also doing a good job of hanging out with her and being friendly while escorting me.

“They’re about to start discussions with my Pa—er, with the patriarch and everyone else. I think they’ll probably say they wanna go back to the Holy Precincts.”

That made sense.

The Schultz clan had already been driven out by Filsand once. Then they’d finally found those ruins and spent twenty years building a life there. It was unlikely they’d want to move again.

The Holy Precincts were covered in craters from my meteors, but the surrounding farmlands and pastures were unharmed.

“But some of the younger guys are saying they want to go with you. Will you take them?”

“Oh, of course.”

“Well, that’s a relief, since I’m gonna go with you, too.”

“I see...”

After observing for a bit, I’d already had an idea that that’s what Diane wanted. I was conflicted, but I was also grateful that Castle Getaeus was growing.

“Hey, speak up!” Diane turned around angrily. “Don’t try and brush me off. I may not get all this trade-hub-continental-whatever business, but you’re gonna destroy daemons and do big stuff, right? Let me help!”

“Certainly. I don’t see any problem with that.”

She might not be as powerful a warrior as Lade, but she was certainly strong enough. We also didn’t have the experience or skills that she had from her years leading Schultz warriors.

“From now on, I’ll be your sword. I’m bringing thirty—no, fifty warriors with me!”

“Mmm...”

Above all else, she had a strong motivation to fight the daemons. At least, that's what I thought...but there was no sense of anger or desire for revenge in her now.

Actually, she seemed extraordinarily committed to me personally. I don't enjoy putting it like this, but I don't think she was full of zealous loyalty, or fired up at the promise of battle. It was more like she had grown dependent on her savior.

I recalled the empty look in her eyes when we'd escaped the Holy Precincts. Was she just trying to fill the hole in her heart by taking on a new role as the wizard's sword?

"You're bound to be a great help—and I thank you, truly. But first, you need to get the Schultz people settled."

"I know that!"

The girl was just fifteen or sixteen years old, but she had already experienced so much, including the loss of her hometown to daemons. A loss caused by her own mother, no less. Telling her to come to her senses would be too tall of an order. No doubt she was carrying some heavy PTSD, but I didn't know the first thing about how to help her deal with that.

It was vexing, but I would just have to wait for her to settle down on her own.

In the end, out of the twelve hundred remaining members of the Schultz clan, about a thousand decided to return to the Holy Precincts under the patriarch. Not only had the Filsand army vowed never to attack them, the duke's soldiers would also maintain security around the Schultz land and provide them with food for their journey home. The other two hundred or so would eventually join Diane at Castle Getaeus.

Of those two hundred, fifty were warriors, while the rest were the families of those warriors and other necessary craftsmen. Personally, I wanted to cut down some space for them in the Endless Forest so they could build a new village, and I also planned to hire a certain percentage of their warriors as soldiers at the castle. In the end, I may

have only succeeded in dividing an already-diminished clan into two. Something told me I'd sown the seeds of future troubles.

"I'll just have to do what I can to make sure things turn out all right." As usual, my life was full of uncertainties. But time had shown that the best thing to do was stay on the offensive, as always.

The day after Elisabeth and Diane joined as new members of our party, Duke Darmund and I took time to share drinks together. Just like before, we were in the duke's private quarters. Both the drinks and the food were of the highest quality, but that didn't help the undercurrent of tension that lingered between us.

"I heard Elisabeth decided to go with you. I expect you to take care of her."

"It's great news for me. But are you sure you're okay with letting her go?"

"Don't worry about it. If she's useful to you, then she's helping me as well. Even if I kept her here, we'd never be close." If anything, the duke looked relieved.

"I see..."

He wasn't the kind of evil that enjoyed seeing others suffer, but he wasn't quite good enough to truly love his daughter. It was because Elisabeth clearly understood this that she'd decided to come to Castle Getaeus and seek her own path.

Things were still a bit cloudy, but I figured there was no need to go further with this topic.

"How about Prince Balzard and Prince Agveil?" I asked as I filled the duke's empty cup with more wine. We both had the timing down pat for this.

"I already issued a decree to officially name Balzard as my successor. There's nothing particularly interesting about him, but he won't screw it up, either. He's got good relationships with his homeland and our newly rehabilitated Schultz 'friends.'"

"That's good news," I told him honestly. "I think he's the right

choice, too.”

I wished I'd had more time to speak deeply with his sons. Balzard was such a fine young man. It was hard to believe he was the son of Duke Darmund.

“It seems that Agveil trusts Balzard as well. Now that the order of succession is clear, I don't think he'll try any more underhanded schemes.”

“I agree. I think he has a lot of potential, too.”

Agveil, on the other hand, was definitely the son of the duke. He was scheming and crafty. However, a certain amount of underhandedness might be necessary in a politician. If Balzard and Agveil could complement each other's weaknesses, they might be able to successfully rule Filsand.

We were both pouring our own high-quality spirits at this point and munching on dried meat pies.

Darmund suddenly spoke. “You know, Lord Margilus.”

“Hmm?”

“Feels a bit odd, but sometimes, you seem like a genuine hero. A real ‘good guy,’ like in stories.”

“Flattering, but I have to disagree.” A bit startled, I peered over at the duke.

He was staring down into his cup. There was a hint of jealousy in his smile. “Sometimes I wonder. What if I became one of those ‘paragons of virtue’ that our priest is always talking about? And then I think: How would it feel to use my power to ‘do the right thing’?”

I didn't respond.

I stared hard at the duke's profile. Did he see through me? And did he feel the same sort of strange dislike but also admiration for me that I felt for him?

He shook his head. “Maybe I'm just getting old.”

“That's probably it...”

He was the villainous duke of Filsand, a man who misused his power. For me, there was significant meaning in our meeting.

As his complete opposite, I finally felt confident of one thing. At

the very least, I had not gone down the wrong path.

But still, there was no guarantee that what I'd already done, or what I would do in the future, would always be "right."

Even in modern-day Japan, it wasn't always easy to determine right from wrong. Did such clear-cut morality even exist in this world?

Chapter 11

IN THE MAIN TOWER of Castle Getaeus...

The bright morning sun lit my room on the top floor. I opened the window and looked over my castle for the first time in a long time. The night before, there'd been a party to celebrate our return after fifty days away.

"It looks like a totally different castle now..."

"It really does. The dwarves sure are hard workers," said a girl in a maid's uniform, busily cleaning up my breakfast. It was Mora, and she seemed to be enjoying herself. The area around Castle Getaeus had actually changed dramatically while I was away.

The castle wasn't very big in the first place, but it was built on a narrow ledge halfway up a steep mountain cliff. Much of the mountain behind the ledge had been chiseled away, and trees had been cleared, creating a semicircular plateau with a radius of about three hundred meters.

The original castle base had been left in place, but the land around it had been excavated about ten meters downward. The new arrangement looked a bit like a two-tiered wedding cake. A thick castle wall had been built around the newly hewn, green-hued lower level of the castle.

Incidentally, the new, lower-level castle wall had been dubbed the outer wall, and the land inside of it the lower courtyard. The castle wall around the already-existing upper level (what I was looking at now) was now called the inner wall, and inside of that was an upper courtyard.

The upper courtyard, originally the *only* courtyard, was quiet now. The lower courtyard bustled with dwarves and humans. About half of the humans were from the Schultz clan, and the other half were laborers hired from Relis City, I guess?

Anyway...

This place was originally a fort that we'd simply glorified by calling it a castle. "But now, this is a real castle, worthy of the name. I

can really be proud of it.”

“Yes! Everyone was surprised and pleased. You really are amazing, Mister Geo!”

“It’s the dwarves who are amazing... Although I guess I helped by casting spells to make giants and stone materials.”

As always, Mora was generous with her compliments to me. It was a bit embarrassing, but it did feel good.

“But I think this castle is what it is because of you.” Even though Mora had stayed up late serving and cleaning after the party, she didn’t show an ounce of fatigue in her cheerful smile. Just watching her made me feel right at home in the completely transformed castle.

The negotiations with the dwarves and the duke of Filsand had both been big successes. We’d achieved our goals of an agreement to build a trade route and form an anti-daemon alliance. I got a skilled blacksmith from Axeholm, and new party members in the form of a diplomat and warmaster.

All in all, the expedition had been a huge success.

We also got some key information when Reyha heard about the so-called King of Daemons from the daemonists. Up until now, we’d thought that there were an infinite number of daemons that occurred organically, like natural disasters. However, if there was something like a king who controlled the daemons, then maybe we could end all invasions by taking it down. Maybe we could even negotiate.

The fact of the matter was, we needed more information on the nature of daemons.

I needed to tend to the new additions to Castle Getaeus, the expansion, and the trade route development, and still find time to expand the anti-daemon alliance.

I also needed to address the suspicion of the warrior clan that I was an Epicenter. There was a lot to do, but it didn’t feel as daunting as before. Rather, I was full of motivation.

Was that thanks to Mora’s effect on me, I wondered?

After breakfast, I gathered my friends in the war room of the main tower. It wasn't everyone, but I called Sedam, Ild, Clara, Reyha, Djirk, and Lade. I also invited Elisabel and Diane, for a total of eight people, plus me.

"Now then, let's start with Sedam. You did a great job protecting the castle while I was away. Thank you for that."

"Yeah... To be honest, it was pretty difficult."

Indeed, he'd visibly lost weight, perhaps from the stress of running an entire castle. But still, while I was gone, there'd been no major issues in the castle. He'd even led offensive missions against daemons and bandits. It was significant work. We'd drunk a lot together the night before, thanking each other and complaining to one another. But officially recognizing the work he did in a setting like this was an important role of the castle lord.

"First, as you can see, the castle expansion work is about sixty percent complete. We still have the barracks, accommodations, and warehouses to finish within the greater castle compound."

"What about the road?"

"The road connecting the three villages within the territory to the castle is already complete. The trade route to Axeholm is complete up to the point the giants had cleared before you left. Valbo is eager for you to conjure up some new giants today."

"The original plan was for one year of construction...isn't this pretty ahead of schedule?"

"That's right, but Valbo seems to have increased the number of personnel significantly. Currently, there are two hundred dwarf workers and five hundred human workers recruited from the neighboring villages and Relis City."

I nodded at Ild's supplementary explanation. So, the people in the lower courtyard were hired from outside after all.

"They're really motivated. How are we on meals and paying salaries?"

“They hired cooks, too, so we don’t need to do much on the meal front. As far as salaries go...”

“The total amount we pay for salary and food expenses for the dwarves and other laborers is about seven hundred gold coins per day,” Ild chimed in again.

Djirk shook his head. “Wow. That’s enough to make your eyeballs pop out of your head.”

I pretty much felt the same way, but the castle still had plenty of capital. “How are the soldiers doing?”

“Great,” Djirk said proudly. “They’re perfect. They got loads of combat experience with that swarm of imps and the bandits that showed up after.” No wonder he was pleased. He had personally trained and commanded the thirty soldiers who’d volunteered to remain in the castle.

“Douva of the Armor House, dispatched from Axeholm, has already established his workshop. From now on, he plans to produce and maintain all the weapons and armor for the soldiers.”

“That’s great news. It seems like a lot of our gear is starting to get worn down.”

I was really glad I’d gone to Axeholm, considering the castle and road construction. Speaking of which, Valbo had said he’d finished building a grand bathhouse in the castle. The night before, I’d drunk too much and hadn’t gotten a chance to try it out, but I couldn’t wait to take a look tonight.

Seven days had passed since we returned to Castle Getaeus.

In the meantime, I’d personally checked in on all of the laborers and dwarf workers gathered in the castle. That was my first priority, since the King of Daemons and his daemonists knew my name and were after my life. Unfortunately, it wasn’t possible to check out every single person using the ESP Medal. For starters, I decided to use the *Detect Enemy* spell while doing my rounds, to see if anyone harbored significant ill will, but they didn’t.

Going forward, I would need to cooperate with the dark elves and warrior clan and be wary of infiltrating daemonists.

Also, as an immediate measure, I would spend three days placing Invisible Demons in dozens of places throughout the castle.

In parallel with these tasks, I continued generating giants, Walls of Stone, and Walls of Iron for the castle and trade route construction work every day. Casting all the spells took less than an hour every day, but mentally, it was all quite taxing.

Between my hard work and the unwavering enthusiasm of Valbo, head of House Dauron, our driven dwarves and laborers soon completed both the castle expansion and the construction of the trade route to Axeholm.

Valbo found me to celebrate. “Hurrah! Tomorrow we start the foundation work for the trade route from Axeholm to Filsand! We’re going to need your tunneling worms now!” That dwarf’s enthusiasm was absolutely infectious.

After so many days doing this, that, and the other thing, I finally decided to tackle a problem that I’d put off for a long time.

“Okay, everyone. Today, we will finally start classes to learn the technique for making golems.”

“All right!”

“I’m ready.”

My students and I were in the great hall of the main tower.

I placed a bench in front of me and sat on it. Three students who were formerly sorcerer-soldiers-in-training were in front of me, responding cheerfully. Log was a young boy with black hair and a sturdy build, Daya was a blonde girl with stern eyes, and Tel was a timid boy with brown hair.

All three looked excited to be there.

They used to be in the sorcerer-soldier training center, which was basically a facility for human experimentation belonging to the Sorcerers’ Guild. Through several twists and turns, they’d become my

wards. According to my agreement with the Sorcerers' Guild at that time, I was obliged to teach them the techniques for creating a golem.

Clara was also there in the back row. I tended to forget, but one of the reasons she was loaned to me by the Sorcerers' Guild was to train in golem-making or other wizardly techniques.

Cooperating with the students and the Sorcerers' Guild to produce golems for various cities was an important job. They were meant to serve as supplementary anti-daemon forces.

However, Log and the others had already been in the castle for nearly two months, and their training hadn't progressed one bit. It wasn't that I was putting it off, though. In order to learn how to read *A Primer for Alchemists* and learn the fundamentals of alchemy for making golems, I'd asked the warrior-priest Torrad to teach them to read and write.

Naturally, this sort of alchemy wasn't the same as the precursor to chemistry that existed in the world I came from. It was actually more like a fake chemistry system for creating magic items, which my perfectionist game master and I had made up. We'd based it on some materials we'd checked out from the library during our student days.

Our worldbuilding had turned into an actual technique that exerted real effects in this world, all thanks to the power of the Watcher.

"Now then. Let's start by opening your textbooks to, umm...page three."

"Yes, sir."

"Hey, your head's in the way."

I only had a single copy of *A Primer for Alchemists*, which I'd given them in advance. It was spread open on the long desk where the three of them were seated. Behind them, Clara peered over their shoulders. I started the explanation I had prepared the night before.

"Golems, and indeed potions, are nothing more than products of alchemy. I want you to think of alchemy as a technique that reproduces the magic that we wizards train our souls to channel, but through physical rather than metaphysical means."

The hall was quiet.

This general explanation part was probably boring for the kids.

Clara, on the other hand, kept glancing from me to the book, looking very interested.

“So, what is the nature of my magic? Your sorcery is a technique for putting the magical forces that exist in the natural world and inside of you to work. Conversely, wizardry is a technique for harnessing the raw chaos that exists outside of this world to change reality itself. Incidentally, the tamed power of chaos is called ‘magical power,’ not to be confused with ‘mana.’”

“This world...” Maybe the world I’m from and this world were two separate realms born from the same sea of chaos?

Hmm?

That thought I just had... There’s something there... I got the feeling that I’d chanced upon something important.

The hall was still quiet.

“Ugh. I’m sorry, let’s continue.”

Going by the fundamental logic of alchemy, and consequently that of magical power, the entire real world and all visible matter was chaos that had temporarily taken solid form. In other words, if you could control chaos, you could create all matter that existed in the world, and maybe even matter that didn’t normally exist.

However, human beings, as material existences, could not typically touch or even recognize the chaotic essence of matter. That was only possible for wizards, who could make their own will slip into the realm of chaos.

In alchemy, chaos was a kind of proto-matter, an ethereal progenitor substance that could become anything.

It materialized through the following steps:

Chaos

Ether

Element

Material

Chaos was formless, everything and nothing. Ether was pure energy that didn’t have any specific properties. Elemental essence referred to energy with the properties of earth, water, fire, or wind. Then, by mixing and combining multiple elements, matter that actually

existed in the world was formed. (Now that I thought about it, it was confusing to use actual scientific terms to try and encapsulate such a fantastical phenomenon...)

“Margilus?”

“Don’t mind me, I’m just pondering how best to explain it. In other words...an alchemist can process matter into its constituent parts. By extracting elemental and ethereal essences, and then using them as ingredients in items and potions, you can create magical effects that aren’t fathomable in everyday life.”

To put it simply, when the fire element was added to a sword, it created a magical, flaming sword. When the water element was added to normal medicine, it became a healing potion.

“Right. But...how exactly do you extract elements and ether from matter?” Clara asked, a bit flustered.

“Easy. Crush it, burn it, melt it, boil it... You need to work with extremely small amounts if you want the process to go well.”

I took several tools from my Infinity Bag and lined them up on the desk. The small tools included an alembic, flask, mortar, pitcher, alcohol lamp, file, and hammer. Some bigger tools included a distiller, strainer, brazier, and more. The long desk was now filled with tools.

“They look like an apothecary’s tools.”

“Yeah, they’re probably similar. The most important is the Smelting Furnace. I can’t take it out here, but I’ll show you another day.”

The Smelting Furnace was basically a heater. However, this was the only tool that had been enchanted in advance, making it a vital magical tool. The furnaces themselves had to be about as tall as a child, so I planned to ask Valbo or the carpenter Zech to build a dedicated alchemy lab later.

“For now, until the laboratory is built, read your textbook and learn how each of these tools are used.”

“Okay!”

“Ahhh...”

“You worked so hard today, Lord.” After giving the children homework and finishing my first lecture, I went to my room to drink some tea. Mora seemed busy, so Reyha was serving me.

“I understood the theory,” Clara said, “but...this ‘chaos’ seems a bit overwhelming. Is it not dangerous?” She sat across from me, drinking her tea with elegance and poise. I didn’t think the slight frown on her face was due to the bitter taste of Reyha’s brew.

“Well, when it comes time to actually start making golems, we will have to be very careful. But I’m thinking I should start them with making potions.”

“Why is that?”

“One reason is that it will serve as practice before actually making golems. Think of it as prudent economic decision, so we don’t waste expensive materials.”

“Oh, I see...”

The silence felt somewhat awkward.

I racked my brain for a topic to change the mood. Just then, I remembered something that I’d wanted to try for a long time. “Now that I think about it, Clara and Reyha, you both like games, right?”

“Huh? Well, I like cards, and I know how to play games of strategy like War Board...”

“I’m very sorry,” said Reyha. “I do not really know much about human entertainment.”

It wasn’t an ideal reaction.

Actually, ever since becoming the lord of Castle Getaeus, I’d secretly wanted to play a fantasy tabletop RPG with genuine adventurers from a real fantasy world. You know, just to see how it went. I didn’t get many chances to work at it, since my duties kept me so busy, but I was already slowly putting together the rules and character sheets.

I did my best to sound enticing. “It’s actually a unique, exciting game that really reflects where I’m from.”

The two of them looked skeptical.

“Heh...”

“Is that so?”

Damn... Even as a genuine wizard, it still wasn't easy to ask girls to join your campaign.

As I was struggling with this...

“Margilus, it's almost time.” Ild had suddenly come to get me.

“Ahhh. Mmm.”

It was time for the feast to welcome all the guests who wanted to meet me.

While I was away, dozens of visitors had come to Castle Getaeus.

Most of them were messengers from the city-states of the Ryuse Alliance, all of which desired to join the anti-daemon alliance, just like Relis City.

Elisabel had already finished hearing their requests individually. She was currently on a diplomatic trip to the various cities of the Ryuse Alliance, negotiating terms of entry. Relis City Council Chairman Brauze was also doing some negotiations behind the scenes, so I was confident that all the talks would go well. Most of the messengers returned to their homes, satisfied, but some had insisted on meeting the wizard before going home, so they were waiting for this opportunity.

According to Reyha's scouting, there was a spy among the messengers. I'm sure they wanted to gather as much information as possible, while also ensuring the benefit of the anti-daemon alliance. Considering my suspect existence, I couldn't really fault them. Probably all of the messengers who'd insisted on meeting me and refused to go home wanted any bit of Great Wizard Margilus information they could get.

I also wanted to show them that I wasn't a dangerous person. With the exception of illegal trespassing and harming residents of the castle, I ordered the dark elves to ignore the visitors and let them ask reasonable questions.

“Everyone! I present to you the lord of Castle Getaeus, the Great Wizard Geo Margilus.”

Reyha opened the door at Ild’s introduction.

The feast had already begun. I wasn’t trying to be fashionably late. This was protocol. Apparently, the lord typically arrived later if his guests were lower-ranked.

The great hall of the main tower, where the afternoon lecture had been held, was glittering with decorations. Tapestries depicted mythological scenes as well as geometrical patterns, and a carpet was spread out across the floor. They’d set out lace tablecloths only used for special occasions and candlesticks adorned with jewels. Ild and Clara had collected quite a few decorations for just such an occasion.

Then I saw Mora and the maids bringing out warm, freshly prepared dishes. Two of the dark elf sisters were in a corner of the hall playing a quiet song on their flutes.

There were over a dozen people seated around the hall. They were eating and smacking their lips, but when they saw me, they stood up.

“Greetings, everyone. I am the wizard, Geo Margilus—at your service.”

I exchanged handshakes with several of the messengers, studying their faces. When I sat down in my chair, which had been raised higher than the others, they took their seats as well. I’d already been lectured half to death by Clara about ceremonial etiquette. But I always worried about what I might be screwing up without realizing it.

“I’ve heard of your past negotiations from my own diplomats,” I flattered one fellow. “I hope to build good relationships with the cities of Ryuse and protect the people from the threat of daemons.”

“Margilus!” someone greeted me enthusiastically.

“Hail Margilus, guardian of Ryuse!”

“Thank you both. Tonight, we toast to the future prosperity of Ryuse and Getaeus. Eat and drink to your heart’s content.”

I raised one hand to quiet the applause and cheering. Soon, the guests turned back to enjoying the food and drink in front of them. The gentle music from the flutes continued.

While the messengers were fairly restrained and polite, the atmosphere of the party was still enjoyable. As the guests all belonged to the Ryuse alliance, I did see some familiar faces. But there was some tension, and I could tell that they were observing my words and behavior.

“Mister Margilus, are you satisfied with the food tonight?”

The chief maid—in other words, Mora—asked me about the dishes she’d served as Reyha refilled my wine glass. She stood up straight with a perfect smile on her face. It was the face of a professional.

“Most satisfied indeed. Thank you, Chief Maid.”

My reply followed proper etiquette for a host, but I meant every word. The chicken pie I’d just eaten was exquisite.

“I’m flattered by your praise.” Mora bowed respectfully, the corners of her eyes scrunching in happiness as she did her best not to smile. She then excused herself and resumed serving the guests.

Next, Clara came over to me. “Margilus, may I introduce you to a guest?”

“Mmm, please.”

Clara put one hand atop the other across her chest as she made her distinctive bow. She wore a pure white dress decorated with golden thread. While it left much of her skin exposed, the design fit her curves perfectly and was a treat to look at.

I was so mesmerized that I forgot my manners and spoke without thinking. “You look amazing, Clara. Truly beautiful.”

“Th...that isn’t proper manners...”

Luckily, Clara soon recovered from her momentary stutter and her red lips broke into a smile. I guess that proved we’d become close enough to tolerate a few missteps in good humor.

“My name is Kozmar Beilg. I represent the council of Soler City, a member of the Ryuse Alliance.”

The first guest she’d brought me was a man of solemn expression. I offered him a single bow. He was powerful in his home city, which was the biggest city-state represented at the banquet. I remembered dealing with Soler City in the past.

“Nice to meet you, Councilor Beilg. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Indeed. Your warm hospitality is most impressive, Lord Margilus. I would like to express our gratitude to you once again for saving a village belonging to our city. I have left tokens of appreciation with your steward.”

“I did nothing more than my duty as a wizard. Please give my regards to the people of Soler, especially the city council chairman. All who fight the daemons are friends of Geo Margilus.”

“Thank you for your encouraging words. If the people hear the tales of Margilus, a man who commands giants to bring down stone, hope will bloom anew in their hearts.”

Things were going at a good pace.

I was nervous at first, but it went better than I'd expected. Of course, it was all thanks to Ild, Mora, and Clara, who made sure everything was prepared perfectly for me.

One afternoon...

I had some free time and decided to take Reyha on a patrol of the castle. It wasn't a leisurely walk to kill time, but a serious examination.

Two pigs, a mother and her piglet, were frolicking around the yard. Things seemed quite lively.

“Don't shake the tip of your sword around! Hold steady and protect your front!”

“Y-yessir... Owwww!”

Djirk was training several soldiers in the courtyard. His wooden sword hit the young soldier hard on the shoulder. *Ouch. That looks painful.*

I didn't want to get in the way, so I changed directions and muttered something I'd just thought of. “Come to think of it, this castle doesn't have one of those...”

“What are you talking about, my lord?” Reyha remained as faithful as ever.

“A doctor. Or a physician, or healer, or anything like that would be fine.”

“If you need healing, why don’t you ask Lord Torrad?”

“That won’t do on its lonesome. Torrad’s healing powers can only be used a certain number of times per day. And a doctor’s job isn’t just about healing wounds.”

Why hadn’t I noticed it before? Castle Getaeus was no longer a fortress full of healthy soldiers, but a town where hundreds of people lived, including children and elderly.

Well, it had only been in the last few days that the head count had suddenly increased, and even then there might not have been a problem if everyone was generally healthy.

The important thing was routine health care and hygiene management to prevent the outbreak of contagion or plague. Compared to modern Japan, the customs and concepts of disinfection and disease prevention in this world were considerably lacking. There was a sewer in Relis City, so it was still much better than the medieval Europe that I’d read about, but that wasn’t much of a baseline.

Work that would require a wide range of medical knowledge would be a bit too much for Torrad. I’m sure there was a healers’ guild in Relis City. I wonder if they could dispatch personnel.

“In that case, my lord...”

“Hmm? Do you already have someone in mind?” Reyha didn’t suggest her own ideas very often, so I felt a certain anticipation.

“There’s someone called the master physician in the Schultz clan.”

“Hmm...I see.”

It was Reyha who patrolled the castle every day as part of our defense. She heard things that never reached my ears.

Master physician, huh? Like Diane’s role as warmaster, it probably denoted someone in charge of the clan’s medical care. If they could manage the whole castle on top of that, then things would work out nicely.

“My lord, this is the house of the master physician.”

For a Schultz clan matter, I naturally turned to Diane. I decided to go to the Schultz camp with her at once. After passing through the inner gate from the upper courtyard, we came to the lower courtyard, which had been created by the labor of giants. It was surrounded by a brand-new exterior wall. Dwarves and workers were hard at work constructing the inns and warehouses we’d need when Castle Getaeus became a trading hub in the future.

The huts of the Schultz people were lined up in one corner. The dwarves had probably aided in their construction, too; they looked sturdy and well built. Diane took me to the second largest hut after the patriarch’s. There was a strange smell in the air—sweet but grassy.

“Auntie Sarria, are you in?”

“Oh, Princess. What’s wrong? Did you get in a fight?”

The master physician was a large woman around the same age as me, or a little bit older. She reminded me of the wife of a ramen shop owner near my home in Japan. She was wearing a long, full robe made of the classic Schultz fur.

“It’s not for me. Lord Margilus says he wants to talk to you.”

“Huh? Oh, oh! Beelzebub!” Sarria—who looked like she weighed somewhere around a hundred kilos—got flustered when she noticed me. “I am Sarria, master physician for the Schultz clan.”

“Please relax. I’ve been wanting to speak to you about your role a bit. Do you have time? If you’re busy, I can come back another day.”

Diane seized on one of my words. “Time! You have time, right? If not, you can just make time!”

I didn’t have any appointments, so I was taking a reserved approach, but Diane jumped in more forcefully.

“If you’re busy,” I assured her, “it’s fine, really.”

“Well, it’s all right, Beelzebub—er, Mister Master Lord Margilus, sir. If I can be of service, please, ask me anything.”

“Really? Well, okay then...”

I looked around the healer’s workspace, searching for an icebreaker to get the discussion rolling.

The walls were lined with dried plants and pots containing

powders and liquids. Pharmaceutical tools similar to the alchemy ones I'd produced the other day were present in large numbers, things like mortars, mills, and small distillers.

"It's embarrassing, but when we were driven from the Holy Precincts by the daemons, I left most of my herbs and tools behind."

"Oh right... I'm sure you can find anything you need in Healwood Village."

I made a mental note to tell Ild to give her some money. Now that Sarria seemed to have relaxed a little, I shifted to why I was there.

"Well, I wanted to ask you: Do you think there are issues with this castle in terms of preventing disease and staying healthy? Give me your true, honest opinion."

I watched silently.

The expression on her face suggested she couldn't bring herself to say what she wanted to. She clammed right up. She didn't look confused about my question at all.

Eventually, she found her voice. "W-well, I apologize in advance...but first of all, they say it's not good for livestock dung to be lying around all willy-nilly, so there really should be an enclosed barn. And! They say that it's best to practice the custom of purifying the hands and mouth with water. Would you be able to increase the wells by one or two more? Water is necessary to clean the dishes and clothes...and for cleaning and managing the lavatories."

Sarria instantly came up with a concrete plan for environmental improvements. It wasn't as if I'd asked and she'd come up with it on the spot; she'd already had these ideas in mind. Without a doubt, she had more ideas and knowledge about hygiene management.

I asked a sneaky question. "What do you think is the cause of disease?"

"In the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation, the cause of most diseases is invisible, poisonous air mixed in with the clean air. Such poisonous air comes from feces, rotten food, and mud, so when you touch something like that, you have to remove the poison."

"And in such tales, how does one remove the poison?"

"With alcohol. The ingredient that makes people intoxicated has

the power to eliminate the poison.”

Oh my. Her knowledge is better than I'd hoped...

It was a little abstract, but she was talking about bacterial infections and alcohol disinfection. On Earth, they hadn't really figured that out until the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

“And I'd like to ask one more thing. If a man was stabbed with a sword in an accident during training, how would you treat him?”

“Well... I would first wash the wound cleanly with alcohol or water. Stopping the bleeding is also important. If the wound is large, I would sew it together with needle and thread. After that, I would feed him kirine grass broth to remove any poison that went into the body. Finally, the wounded should rest and recover.”

“Hmmm...”

I was utterly impressed with Sarria's smooth and articulate explanation of her treatment method. She could even give stitches!

When I didn't respond right away, Diane grew anxious. “Is that good enough? Will our master physician's knowledge be useful to you?”

“Oh, of course. I was only amazed at the wisdom of the Schultz clan.”

“Heh heh... Well, good!”

Sarria was more subdued. “Earning your praise will please our ancestors, Lord Margilus.”

Diane looked up at me, and I gave her a pat on the head. She narrowed her eyes, looking pleased. She was cute in just the way a girl her age should be.

“Oh, I just had an idea.” Diane suddenly drew a dagger from her waist. I never would have expected what she planned to do next.

“You want to see how Sarria treats wounds, right? In that case, I just need to make one!”

I shouted before I knew it. “Stop that at once!”

“Stupid girl!” Reyha snarled.

I hadn't shouted like that in a long time. Diane's dagger, which was a second away from mutilating her own arm, got knocked out of her hand by Reyha. She had appeared faster than any of us could

notice.

“Wow!” Diane gaped. “My lord, I...”

“Such a demonstration will not be necessary,” I said gravely. “You are an important vassal. Don’t hurt yourself over nothing.”

After the blow to her wrist, Diane’s red eyes were filled more with despair than with anger.

I thought there would be some danger when she’d decided to bring some of the Schultz clan to join us at Castle Getaeus, but I didn’t think she would do something so extreme. I couldn’t think of anything to do to comfort Diane after she’d almost resorted to self-harm except to hug her and rub her back.

“Really? Am I really important to you, my lord? You won’t cast me away?”

“No...I’d never do that. You’re absolutely important. So you make sure to take care of yourself, too.”

A few minutes later, Diane had calmed down. “Okay... I won’t do something like that again. I’m very sorry, my lord.”

“It’s all right. Everything’s fine now, so don’t worry about it.”

I didn’t realize how emotionally unstable she’d become. *She must still be suffering from all the tumult she went through back at her hometown...*

“A-anyway.” I decided to set aside Diane’s problem for now (it seemed that’s what I always did with problems) and addressed Sarria again.

“I find your medical knowledge to be outstanding. Therefore, I would like to ask you to manage medicine and sanitation not only for the Schultz clan, but for the entirety of Castle Getaeus.”

“You really want me to take on such a large role?”

I wasn’t expecting an answer right away, and I would need Ild to arrange personnel and facilities, but I definitely wanted her to be the chief medical officer of the castle.

Diane and Reyha looked at Sarria, wondering why she was hesitating over such an easy decision.

“I’ll do it,” Sarria answered right away.

“Then you have my thanks.”

Inside Castle Getaeus, Mora and Reyha came to Clara’s private quarters. They were getting together for tea.

“Madam,” Reyha reported. “The jeweler who came from Relis City the other day was a spy, as expected.”

“Oh my, so we were right.”

Mora and Reyha made the tea while Clara arranged baked goods on a plate. Clara normally had a strong sense of hierarchy and refused to do any chores. She only made an exception when having tea with this particular group.

However, there was something fishy about Reyha’s report.

“It seems they held no intentions of conducting an assassination or planning a disturbance. Perhaps they were only checking on things and confirming their means of communication with the lady.”

“Good job. If that’s the case, you can leave it alone.”

“Understood.”

“Hmmm...”

It wasn’t a subject that Mora was very involved in. Hearing the word “spy” made her awfully uneasy. “Spies sure are scary. Isn’t it better to get rid of them?”

“Even if we kick out one or two spies, they’ll just send others. The problem is the side that sends the spies. That’s why it’s better to leave the spies that only listen for rumors alone. That makes them feel more secure,” Clara explained.

“Secure?” Mora’s eyes grew round.

“Our lord’s power is great, and he has a very different way of thinking than most people. That is fearsome to the rulers of the world.”

“That’s why we show the spy that there are many people on Margilus’s side who think normally, and that the lord is also living a normal life.”

Clara and Reyha understood well that Geo’s ethics and values were very different from the dominant ideologies of their world. They were also well aware of how much fear the presence of an individual with the power to obliterate an entire country, and who acted outside of the social norms, would cause rulers.

Mora sighed and tilted her head to the side. “I’m sorry. I’m not educated in these sorts of things...”

“You’re just fine the way you are.” Clara nodded coolly.

“But I want to do more for Mister Geo... Oh! Shall I help you find spies?”

Mora was indeed a normal girl, but she was the first one to jump at the chance to follow the strange existence that was the great wizard.

“You’re like my own flesh and blood. If I were to put you at risk, he’d be very, very angry with us.”

“The master’s punishment... Ah... Y-you’re right. To take such risks is rightly our role.”

Clara shrugged her shoulders. For some reason, Reyha’s face reddened, and Mora still seemed apologetic.

“Listen, Mora.” Clara whispered as she put her hands on both of Mora’s shoulders and looked into her eyes. “The reason I just told you that you’re like family is because you are someone who wants to help him no matter what. For me, the most effective way to help is to use my position and knowledge. For Reyha, it’s to use her skills in battle and subterfuge. Mora...what are you good at?”

“My...” Mora looked down at the floor as she thought, but then quickly looked back up into Clara’s eyes. “I’m good at cleaning, laundry, cooking, sewing, talking to strangers, and helping my father. And everything that gives Mister Geo energy!”

“That’s right. So...how about you focus on that?”

“Can do!”

“Good answer.” Clara praised Mora’s cheerful response, then she thought to herself. *Hopefully, Mora’s pure and wholesome style will keep*

Geo grounded here. Even if that means that I'll never be more than his loud-mouthed assistant.

Castle Getaeus seemed to be running smoothly.

Nox, a young boy who'd gone to Relis City to procure food, came back with many wagons overflowing with meat and grains.

Ild was quite impressed that an unsophisticated country boy had done so well at his task in the big city.

The students were busy taking Torrad's classes as well as trying to extract the "water element" from herbs. The alchemy lab was complete, and soon they would finally be able to try making real potions.

The castle soldiers, Schultz clan, and warriors were rotating shifts to guard the area around Castle Getaeus and the trade route.

I'd already requested the dwarves build a treatment center for Sarria, our newly appointed medical officer. Emergency construction was underway. She immediately visited Healwood Village and picked up a number of herbs. At Ild's suggestion, we decided to hire a number of young people from Healwood Village to serve as assistants to the medical officer.

In the future, we planned to have several soldiers learn first aid techniques.

Trade route construction was also going well. Of course, the complete route from Castle Getaeus to Axeholm and Filsand wasn't yet complete, but the parts that required my giants and worm monsters for large-scale construction and tunneling were already finished.

Chapter 12

ONE DAY...

“Okay, I got the Holy Knight.”

“I don’t know about him...”

“Okay then! Time for judgment by Rimeydal the Creator.”

Having finished our morning work, my friends and I were playing a game in my private quarters in the main tower.

On the table between me and Sedam was a wooden board and small game pieces. It was a classic game in this world called War Board, similar to shogi or chess.

I silently renewed my vow to get my friends to play an RPG someday.

It was my turn.

I used my upside-down Priest to touch Sedam’s piece. Much like in shogi, the pieces lay flat on the board. Without a second of delay, Clara (our referee) checked the types of each piece and made a judgment.

“Margilus loses.” Clara solemnly announced her judgment and removed my Priest from the board.



“Ugh... Dammit. You tricked me.”

“Margilus? That’s unsportsmanlike.”

“Rimeydal preserve!”

I accepted her advice and uttered a phrase that was more or less equivalent to “god help me.”

I’d made a bad judgment call. If I lost with the Priest, that meant Sedam’s piece was either a General or Hero. Either way, I was in hot water, and his pieces were getting closer to my Holy City.

“Do you think I would lose so easily to a man who just learned War Board yesterday?” Sedam raised an eyebrow at me. That was his smug expression, and I’d seen it a lot lately.

“It’s not over yet.”

Sedam certainly was an intellectual, but considering we were just about equal in the game, he must not be that good. The evidence of that was in Clara’s sighs of resignation.

“As always, it’s painful to watch your War Board tactics.”

“Ha ha ha!” Mora laughed brightly. “Both Sedam and Mister Geo seem to be having fun, so what’s wrong with that?”

There was no way I could let myself lose in front of Mora, who’d busied herself with preparing sil tea.

“Now it’s my turn...that’s a Spy, right? I should get rid of it now.”

“Sedam wins...”

“Heh heh.”

Reyha clenched her fists. “My lord, you can still make a comeback!”

He spotted my trump card lurking near the enemy line. Reyha was desperately cheering me on from behind. I could see sweat on her brow. She was even more into the game than I was.

I held my staff to my cheek and pondered my next move, when...

“Lord Margilus! I have a report!”

The third dark elf sister, Gilma, burst into the room.

“What is it?”

“It’s...the warrior clan. The same detachment who came to the

castle before... A man named Canberils is heading this way!"

"Huh?!"

The relaxed atmosphere suddenly grew ice-cold.

It was the warlord, Canberils. He was the one who suspected me of being an Epicenter and had held an inquisition. He'd left the castle to consult the clan's Council of Elders for a verdict, and now he had returned.

"It's been a while, wizard."

A bitter voice resounded in the great hall of the main tower.

It was Warlord Canberils. As usual, he was dressed all in crimson with flashy accessories. He removed his devilish mask to show me his true face.

He had a painful expression, but there was no reaction from my *Detect Enemy* spell.

"Yes, I'm glad to find us both alive." I nodded gracefully from my throne in the great hall. To my left and right stood Clara and Sedam, with Ild one step below them and Reyha waiting behind me.

The warrior clan stood in a position where I looked down on them. Beside Canberils were two guards, someone who covered their entire body with a hooded robe, and Lade. He was also a member of the warrior clan, but unlike his superior officer, his mouth was tight, and he looked irritated.

"The warchief and others you left behind really helped us out. Please accept my thanks."

"I'm glad. We received those reports as well. Especially your work in Filsand. You did a lot of work there."

He could only be talking about when I'd taken down the daemonic legion and daemonists. I'm sure he'd heard all about it from Lade, including that the daemonists knew my name from some sort of existence called the King of Daemons. That was the part that matched with the oracle's prophecy. It was an explosion of suspicion.

“It was all thanks to the cooperation of your warchief and our allies. Now then...” Even though I was acting cool, I was actually feeling quite uneasy. I sensed nervous tension from Clara and the others as well. “Shall we get straight to business, warlord? You suspected me of being a daemon or an Epicenter...what was the result of the continued inquisition?”

“Our suspicions were indeed as you say.” Canberils dropped to one knee. The other warriors followed suit. “The conclusion of the warrior clan’s Council of Elders is that the probability of you being a daemon or a daemonist...is extremely low.”

When Canberils paused for a second while declaring the result, both Sedam and Clara let out sighs of relief. I felt the same way as them, but that didn’t mean our talks were over.

“So that means...what? I have not been completely cleared of these allegations?”

“Right. But we will not be looking into you any further. There is actually a separate issue.”

“You mean the oracle’s prophecy?”

“Precisely. In the five-hundred-year history of the warrior clan, the oracle’s prophecies have always proved true. And yet, now this strange circumstance has arisen. The issue is bigger than just whether she is right or wrong. If the daemonists have also been given your name in a prophecy...” Canberils’s stern expression hardened even more. He looked almost agonized. “The Council of Elders wants to find the cause of this phenomenon by any means necessary.”

“That makes sense...”

If it turned out the prophecies of the oracle the clan had followed for five hundred years were no longer reliable—or worse, of daemonic origin—the morale of the warrior clan would collapse.

“Right now, it is you, Lord Wizard, who sits at the center of this phenomenon. Therefore, I humbly ask: Will you help us?”

“Hmmm...”

I had been thinking about it since the commotion at Filsand.

In the end, it seemed the interpretation of the term Epicenter had been the issue. In other words, maybe the term epicenter meant “a place that connects this world with another world.” If that was the case,

then it would suggest that an Epicenter that transforms into a daemon nest like Diane's mother, and my own Magic Gate—which connects to the power of chaos—were different expressions of similar powers.

"After causing us so much trouble, now you want us to cooperate? That's a pretty selfish way to handle things," Clara answered Canberils in a cold voice. She probably took my thinking for hesitation. But I had come to understand this atmosphere well now. She was just playing the role of bad cop.

"Yes, I understand that. We also must practice proper etiquette." Canberils tried to continue matter-of-factly. "As such—"

The person concealed beneath robe and hood suddenly stood up. They stopped Canberils from standing with one hand.

They walked quietly toward me, lowered the hood, and removed their concealing robe.

"It is my pleasure to meet you for the first time, wizard."

The speaker had a cool, soothing voice. Her long, black hair swayed as she bowed respectfully.

"I am the repository of our clan's knowledge, the summation of all that was given to me by our mediums and leaders."

She stood up and looked at me with big, green eyes.

She was a beautiful young woman with a slender body. The combination of her many-pleated red skirt and front-closing white jacket reminded me of a Japanese shrine maiden.

And that wasn't all that was remarkable about her.

"Are you an elf? A true elf?" Sedam asked, stunned. Indeed, this "repository of knowledge" boasted pointy ears. Reyha was a dark elf, and I knew a bit about elves in this world, but I never thought I'd see one here.

"You are correct. This body was born of Rimeydal. However, I am of the second generation."

"Just as I thought..." Sedam murmured.

Clara looked reverent. "So, they do exist..."

Judging from the attitudes of Sedam and Clara, true elves must have been much more uncommon than ordinary elves. Ild also looked fascinated, and Reyha was stiff as a stone.

I was awfully interested, myself.

“I’m surprised that an oracle would come on her own. We are grateful, but...are you the same oracle who received the prophecy?”

Sedam and the others were uncharacteristically flustered, so I took the role of speaking calmly.

“Please, call me a mystic,” the elf said, with a graceful smile.

Her appearance was that of a young woman, but she spoke with the composure of someone much older. Given that she was an elf, I felt quite certain she was even older than she seemed.

“To answer your question...yes. I deeply apologize for the great inconvenience our shallow lapse has visited upon you.”

The oracle planted both knees upon the floor and bowed deeply, her hands on the ground in front of her. Behind her, Canberils, the two guards, and Lade did the same. I couldn’t get over her beauty. The whole spectacle of apology made me feel guilty. It was also shocking to see the huge clan members behind her behaving in such a way.

“Please stand, mystic. Everyone else, too. Honestly, I’d prefer an explanation over apologies, right now.”

“Your priorities are absolutely correct.” She spoke in a matter-of-fact manner, but there was something musical in her tone. Was it force of habit, as a TTRPG player, that made me want to trust everything a beautiful elf said?

I resolved to pay close attention.

“Aha! Trope alert! The beautiful elf maiden has arrived!”

“Yagi, did you think if you brought in a beautiful elf maiden, you’d be able to railroad us into a big, unreasonable fetch quest?”

“Hmm... Do you want to refuse her, then?”

“Of course not.”

Those were the days.

I flashed back to about twenty years ago when I was playing *D&B*. I’d forgotten exactly what kind of quest it was, but I’ll never forget

Yagi's smug face.

At the time, the fact that players always accept the requests of beautiful elves was almost part of the beauty of the form. How could we do anything else?

But now, actually faced with a real-life beautiful elf maiden... would I refuse her?

Well, of course not.

The oracle of the warrior clan, a true elf, she who was the repository of knowledge. This woman with three distinguished monikers was that enchanting.

She wasn't just pretty, or cute. Her eyes, her voice, her desire to protect, her allure and knack for flattery, all stood out. She was the living definition of charm.

At my age, as an office employee, I had met many beautiful women while entertaining clients, but this oracle was on an entirely different plane of existence. If I hadn't recalled Yagi's smug face, I might have completely fallen for her at first sight, the way Sedam had, beside me.

Her enchanting voice drew us in. "In order to understand the circumstances behind this dreadful mishap, please allow me to explain what daemons and the warrior clan are in the first place. I think we should start there: with the true history long hidden to so many."

This is not the time to get swept up in her voice... I felt a wave of nerves come over me and gulped. *Focus on her words!*

"I'm very interested. Please, tell us."

"As you desire."

The mystic spoke without hesitation, telling us the following story.

Daemons were the vanguards sent from another world, who crossed into this world through a gate called an Epicenter. The first Epicenter was born long, long ago from the heart of the Divine King, when he was drunk on despair and hatred.

In that distant age, a great hero had destroyed the Epicenter born from within the Divine King and defeated the countless daemons spawned from it. This hero's power was granted to him by a legendary sage.

The sage granted the hero many boons. The divine legion, a holy sword, and an elf maiden. The divine legion were warriors to fight the daemons. The holy sword was a weapon with the strength to destroy an Epicenter. And the elf maiden sacrificed herself to give the hero and the divine soldiers great magic power.

After the battle, the hero abandoned his war with the daemons and served Shrendal. The divine legion hunted daemons under the guidance of the sage...and their descendants became known as the warrior clan.

The repository of knowledge was the daughter of the first-generation elf maiden, a woman not born, but made.

The sage granted the warrior clan many skills to fight the daemons. One of those was a ritual to communicate with the spirit of the first elf maiden to acquire prophecies of daemon behavior.

"To be precise," the mystic told us, "this is a ritual to read the memory and consciousness of daemons from their corpses."

We were silent.

What she'd told us in her sing-song voice were secrets that went all the way back to the very roots of this world.

I had already researched and asked people about the tale of the hero who'd foiled the first brood war, so I knew most of it. But this was the first I'd heard about the Divine King either becoming or creating an Epicenter, and of the sage. There was no evidence that what she said was true, but if she was a true elf, then she must have already been living for hundreds if not thousands of years. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd even seen many of these events herself.

I mean, I was grateful, and this so-called true history was important, but the story she'd just told us was pretty outrageous.

She wasn't done dropping bombshells. "Daemons do not actually possess individual egos. The sage teaches that they are born in swarms, like ants or bees, with a single collective consciousness."

The mystic continued, oblivious to our surprise.

“Therefore, by examining the consciousness of a daemon’s brain, even in a corpse, it is possible to read the consciousness of all daemons. The daemonists call this collective consciousness the King of Daemons.”

The mystic paused.

When I looked around at everyone’s reaction, Sedam, Clara, and Reyha had looks of both surprise and disgust. Ild wasn’t following the story at all. Meanwhile, the warrior clan, including Canberils and Lade, looked pained throughout the entire thing.

“Right...” I collected my thoughts. “I understand the advantages. But isn’t using the corpse of a daemon the sort of thing the daemonists do themselves? Isn’t it dangerous?”

The mystic’s story reminded me of Corbal, who’d transformed and fused with an altar made of daemon corpses, and Diane’s mother, who’d ultimately been brainwashed by daemonism and fused with an Unholy Spirit, transforming into a daemon nest. The warrior clan, bound to a life of hunting daemons, were as dependent on daemonic corpses as the daemonists were.

“As you might expect, there are dangers involved. So far, we have been blessed with the protection of Rimeydal, and I have been able to fulfill my role without any serious issues. But the reason for this is that by hiding my explorations behind the medium of corpses, my existence was concealed from the collective consciousness of the daemons.”

“Until now.”

“Exactly.” The mystic nodded slightly. “When I found information pointing toward you, the ritual was exactly the same as it had always been. But perhaps...” The small sigh that the elf maiden gave here might have been the first emotion she let us see. “Perhaps the King of Daemons is aware of what we do. Perhaps it intentionally gave us your name, and the knowledge that you were an Epicenter, hoping we would destroy its greatest rival on its behalf.”

“I see.”

We had finally reached the end of the explanation.

I nodded and readjusted my position in the chair. As I did, I verified this story in my head and thought about what should be done.

I didn’t have a definitive answer regarding the broader interpretation of the word “epicenter” that I’d pondered earlier. The

warrior clan still didn't know about my Gate of Magic, and considering the reaction of the Daemon's Sight during my inquisition, they'd probably come to the conclusion that the information was a false story fed to them under the pretense of a prophecy.

Although, I should have been happy that their inaccurate interpretation cleared my name of suspicion.

"I am responsible for this blunder," the mystic declared. "When I learned that you were going to build a mechanism for fighting the daemons in this world...I knew that I could never be forgiven for such a great sin. A horrible trespass, against a good and mighty man. But I beg you: Please, direct your anger toward my life only." The elf maiden dropped to the ground as soon as she finished speaking, her voice gone nearly silent. "I beg you."

The warriors behind her dropped down as well.

I watched silently.

Clara looked at me with a troubled expression. To be honest, I felt troubled, too.

Before, I'd known almost nothing about daemons, but now I had mountains of information. Moreover, there were many terms that the mystic had used that I'd never heard before. We couldn't overlook what we'd learned, or it would come back to hurt us later.

"As the warlord, I apologize as well. Please accept the many warrior clan treasures we brought as recompense for your suffering." Canberils spoke gravely from behind the mystic. Lade didn't say anything, but he was flat on the ground like everyone else.

When they first arrived, I'd felt a lot of anger and anxiety. I didn't desire to dwell on those feelings any longer. To my left and right, both Sedam and Clara nodded.

I finally spoke. "I accept your apology. However, I don't need you to pay with your life."

"This one thanks the great magician for his boundless kindness toward one so unworthy of mercy."

Canberils was more prosaic. "Thank you."

I looked at Canberils and the mystic, who lifted their heads in relief, and thought some more.

There were many things I wanted to check and confirm regarding the Divine King, the sage, and the King of Daemons. It looked like we could finally proceed with the alliance with the warrior clan.

That meant...

I had to go with them. To the home of the warrior clan.

This was the second visit of the warrior clan to my castle. The tension that existed between us had largely been diffused by their apology and my acceptance.

However, revealing the truth of the prophecy made me more anxious than relieved. That was because I'd learned that they were using daemon corpses to draw out information about the overmind of the daemons. What's more, there was a possibility that information about me was being intentionally distorted.

If the warrior clan knew about my Gate of Magic, they would probably come up with an entirely different opinion. There was a possibility that the Epicenter that served as a conduit to the world of the daemons might be similar to my own gate. The two could be confused, and that could mean lethal consequences for me.

If possible, at some point, I hoped to share the exact situation with Canberils by unveiling the truth. But the time wasn't quite right yet. That was one reason that I needed to solidify our friendship with the warrior clan.

When I suggested that I visit the home of the warrior clan—which they referred to as their castrum—the mystic maiden was pleased.

She actually said, "I would like to borrow your knowledge as a wizard in order to verify the truth of the prophecy." Apparently, this was the current top priority for the warrior clan. The clan entrusted their fates to this woman, and the reliability of her prophecies was riding on the answer.

Apparently the Council of Elders had decided that, while they had serious reservations, they would allow me to visit the castrum if it would remedy the situation. This was the information I'd received from Canberils, but I was concerned about the difference in reception

between him and the Council of Elders.

Finally, I accepted the reparations from the warrior clan, ending our meeting with the oracle. The warrior clan would return to the barracks the next day. I declared my intention to join them.

I was a bit worried about whether they would accept my sudden request to visit, but judging by Canberils's reaction, everything had already been arranged.

That night...

Thanks to Mora, I was able to throw the warrior clan and their mystic a feast. Canberils and his team were pleased, but the warriors who'd lived at Castle Getaeus for two months were especially moved.

I wanted to go to sleep early to prepare for the next day's journey, but this seemed right.

"Are you serious?" Clara asked. "You definitely need my strength and counsel. You can just leave Sedam here like you did before."

Sedam raised a finger. "The negotiations this time are with the warrior clan. A noble's etiquette and social graces are useless there. Besides, you'll also need to research this whole King of Daemons mystery. You'll definitely need my experience as a veteran adventurer, to say nothing of my wide breadth of knowledge."

Clara and Sedam started arguing. I'd instigated it by suggesting we decide who would accompany me to the warrior clan's castrum. Surely they both realized that I would have to leave one of them behind to care for Castle Getaeus. Neither of them was ready to give in.

If this had been a discussion about who was going on a picnic, I would've happily taken them both, but we didn't have that luxury.

"A sorceress has plenty of knowledge about daemons," Clara insisted. "And even if they look like barbarians, the clan has a history and traditions. My social skills will definitely be useful."

"There's a possibility that you will be betrayed, even by your own party. If that happens, I can take care of myself and survive without getting in Margilus's way."

I watched silently.

As usual, Reyha was off to the side, happy to stay out of the argument. Probably she assumed from the start that she'd be coming along. She was right, of course. I couldn't afford to leave her behind.

Mora, who was busy preparing tea, couldn't stand to listen in silence any further. "Hey, stop being so selfish, both of you! It's Geo's decision, isn't it?"

I continued to watch silently.

They looked at each other, then looked at me in unison.

Clara said, "You'll be better off if I'm with you, Margilus."

"Maybe she's stronger," said Sedam, "but I'm much better at solving puzzles."

"Mmm..."

I put my staff to my cheek and stared at them for a bit. I understood well that both of them had my best interests at heart. Of the two, Sedam's motivation as a curious scholar was the easier to read.

But in any case, I'd already decided.

"I'm taking Reyha and Sedam this time."

"Oho, got it, boss." He flashed us a quick wink.

I actually needed an attendant who could stay at the castle anytime I had to leave for diplomacy, like when I'd gone to Filsand. Canberils had asked me to bring only the bare minimum, so this was my decision. As Sedam had said, he had a wider base of relevant knowledge, so I definitely wanted him along.

Which wasn't to say that Clara was his inferior in scholarship; she had her own expertise.

"What do you mean?" I thought Clara would get angry, but instead she dropped her head and said in a low voice, "Won't you miss me scolding you?"

This startled me. "Clara?"

So she was aware that she was always scolding me...though that wasn't the most important thing right now.

"That's not it," I assured her. "I feel safest leaving the castle in your hands."

That was no excuse, either. It was how I really felt.

Sedam was also capable of serving as our castellan, though in my experience, I couldn't really leave Ild in charge for long. However, what if there was a sudden crisis, like when the warrior clan had come?

Clara was the best at handling that kind of problem. She possessed a natural understanding of how to give orders; she definitely exceeded me in that respect. You might even say it was her birthright as an aristocrat.

But there was a bigger reason.

"You understand what I want more than anyone. So if anything happens to me, I know you will do a wonderful job of leading everyone."

"Really? Do you really mean it?"

"Of course I do."

Clara pursed her lips and turned away.

Had I said the wrong thing again? I looked around. Mora was frowning, Sedam had one eyebrow raised, and Reyha's eyes were full of affection. They were all looking at Clara and me.

What in the world?

Clara finally looked up at me. "W-well...anyway...I suppose that's just how things have to be." Her blue eyes seem to be a little moist. I wasn't used to seeing this expression on her face. At least she was somewhat happy that I trusted her. "I promise to take great care of Castle Getaeus."

"I'll be counting on you."

Actually, there was a chance that while I was gone, the King of Daemons might try to attack the castle in some way or another. I decided to leave my Staff of Wizardry with her.

"Setting that aside, Margilus..."

"Hmm?"

"Even the head of a family should never talk about his own death lightly. You were talking to me in private...so even if you write this off as a discussion in confidence, you are *forbidden* from showing such weakness in public. You hear me, Margilus? What am I going to do with you?"

Ah, and now the scolding had begun. It looked like I'd be getting even less sleep than I'd thought...

Sedam, Reyha, and I were at the Castle Getaeus gate. Soldiers were lined up on each side, creating a path for us to pass through. Everyone had gathered to watch us go, including the servants and Schultz clan.

Out of all those people, it was Diane who came up to me.

"Hey, Your Lordness. Are you sure you don't need me to go? You know I'll do anything to protect you."

"Yes, I know that."

I almost gave in, seeing the desperation in her request. Somehow, I managed to stop myself. I didn't plan to ride into battle this time. While I was grateful for her faithfulness—which might have grown dangerously close to fanaticism—her hasty nature wasn't suited for this kind of meeting.

And so I told her, "Don't forget, you also have a duty to your clanspeople."

"Right. You're right. I know."

Sedam came to whisper something to me. I'd only heard it in passing before, but the Schultz clan apparently described themselves as descendants of the Divine King, who'd become the first Epicenter. It would be far too dangerous to take her along this time.

"I'm leaving you here because I want you to protect everyone in the castle. Take this task as a sign of my trust in you."

"Trust?"

"That's right. Everyone in that castle is like family to me. I'm asking you to protect them. To me, that's the most important role in the castle."

"But...what if my lord doesn't return? Then I..."

I wasn't trying to lie to her, but it would be hard to convince her logically while she was so emotional.

"If something like that happens, Clara will take my place. She will take over my work and do it well. Consider her words to be my words, and do whatever you can to help her."

She didn't respond.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Clara take charge of the vacant-eyed warrior, her own eyes a clear and piercing blue as she looked at me.

"Clara's words are your words? So, if I do what Clara says, that would make you happy?"

"Absolutely."

"I see... Well...okay."

It took a long time to get her on board, but Diane finally relented.

Clara didn't look entirely comfortable. "Margilus..."

"I'll leave you to it."

I spoke matter-of-factly, leaving only my parting words with an annoyed-looking Clara. Inwardly, I marveled over how well she'd handled what I'd just asked of her. Well, given all we'd been through, it would take more than this to put her off her game.

"Take this Staff of Wizardry, and let it be the proof of your authority. Use it at your own discretion in case of an emergency."

That morning I'd charged *Fireball* and *Lightning* attack spells into the staff before handing it off to her. That much could fight off troops of five hundred or even a thousand humans or daemons.

She was someone who would always rise to a challenge.

"Leave everything to me," she said. "Do what you need to do, and don't worry about anything here."

Once I was finally ready to go, I nodded to everyone I'd kept waiting—the mystic who called herself a repository of knowledge, the warlord Canberils, the warchief Lade, and their two guards. The ten warriors who had previously been stationed at the castle were to remain.

Ild wished us well. "Hurry back."

"Be safe," said Djirk.

We took these farewells as our signal to leave. When I looked back at the castle gate one last time, I saw little Mora waving her hands furiously. I could feel her calling out my name so fervently, it hurt my heart a little.

We were walking.

After such a lively and cheerful send-off, the endless mountain path felt somewhat anticlimactic.

"I think you can go ahead and tell me now," I said to Lade's massive back.

"Tell you what?"

"How to get to the warrior clan's castrum."

Sedam followed up on my question. "I get that you all live and die by your secrecy, but you could at least tell us how many days it will take."

The clan flatly refused to tell us where the castrum was, or how to get there. There were lots of excuses. It was their law, and they were hated by many people. But we were already on our way there.

Moreover, when Canberils had previously said he would go to the castrum to consider the results of the inquisition, he was gone for two months. I felt I had to be ready for at least a month-long trip each way. But it was even rougher to keep trudging along without any explanation or even an estimate of how long it would take.

Both Sedam and I wanted more disclosure. Reyha said nothing, as usual.

The maiden hidden beneath hood and robe stopped and bowed deeply to us. "I apologize for my rudeness. Please forgive me. Know that we will use a special means of transportation for this journey. If you can wait for just one more day, I am sure all your questions will be answered."

Sedam and I decided we could manage that. And not just because it was a beautiful elf maiden who'd asked us to.

The next night, our journey still continued.

We weren't taking the Lawful Way, but instead we went through a forest valley that couldn't even be considered a side path. The guards carried torches, and I used my *Light* spell, so I could at least see where I was putting my feet, but it was still awfully dark.

"We're not going underground, are we? Or is the warrior clan land actually in this valley?" Sedam grimaced, a combination of curiosity and irritation. Meanwhile, Reyha was gazing up at the starry sky with a strange look on her face.

"What is it, Reyha?"

"My lord. The sky...it's wrong."

"The sky?"

Sedam and I joined her in looking up. Unlike the night sky in Japan, this sky was beautiful and full of stars...but what was this...?

"What is that?" Reyha wondered breathlessly. "A star? There shouldn't be a star there..."

"You're right," Sedam said, fretfully. "It's more like..."

Sedam was a ranger who specialized in outdoor activities, sort of like fantasy special forces. Reyha was an astute spy. Between them, there must have been a wealth of astronomical knowledge, such as how to reckon their direction and position based on the stars. The fact that both of them said this at the same time... I wasn't sure what it meant.

"We're here." Canberils's voice surprised all of us. I couldn't see him in the shadow of a large boulder. At some point, the line of warriors proceeded farther back into the valley.

Just in case, Reyha went ahead first, following behind them.

“What the hell? What is this?”

“Is it...a ship?”

It was. Enshrined in the bottom of the valley was a ship so big it looked like it could sail even on the open sea. It was probably around twenty meters long. To me, it looked like one of the so-called tall-masted ships, and there was a mast, but the sail wasn't up. Actually, on closer inspection, it didn't even have a sail. There were also a number of legs jutting out on either side, probably to provide stability on land.

“The special means you mentioned was this ship?” Clearly, this ship was beyond even Sedam's knowledge. He stared at it, mouth agape. “How can a ship travel on land?”

“I've never seen anything like this before...” Reyha's eyes were round in surprise.

“I-Interesting...” While I was surprised, I at least had heard of something like this before. “I think I know what this is. An airship?”

Sedam blinked. “You've seen one before?”

“Well done, wizard,” said Lade. “Guess we underestimated you.”

I'd never imagined I would see something like this, and I'd never seen anything like it before, but I *had* heard of flying ships in a fictional sense—that is...fantasy airships, not dirigibles or blimps.

“As you say, this is the Moonlight Ship of the warrior clan. We'll start it up without delay.”

Moonlight Ship? It was a pretty elegant name.

Sedam and Reyha wore expressions of doubt. “Hmm?”

Canberils signaled something to the warriors who were aboard the Moonlight Ship.

At that instant, some sort of purple light appeared around the thick, sailless mast.

“Hmm?”

The purple light shot up vertically, stretching farther and farther, like living threads. There seemed to be four or five beams of light. The mast shook as if it was tangled in them, their movements exactly like those of tentacles. Next, the number of threads, brightness, and thickness of the light all multiplied. Before we knew it, there was a canopy of purple light above our heads.

No way.

I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

It wasn't that the purple light had just appeared out of nowhere. There was already something transparent and huge above the Moonlight Ship...a big, plush canopy. It was so big that when we looked up, we couldn't see anything else. The entire thing emitted purple light and looked like a giant, round hat, but the vertex was more like a flower petal, flashing red and green.

I had seen something else like this before.

"No way...is it a jellyfish?" I murmured, stunned.

A profound sense of wonder. That's what I felt. This real-life fantasy was going beyond my knowledge and imagination.

"That's right. The Moonlight Ship flies in the sky with the aid of a nocturnal monster." Lade looked prouder than I had ever seen him before.

Chapter 13

SO, WE BOARDED A SHIP that was hanging from a giant jellyfish that flew in the sky.

Saying it out loud sounded ridiculous. Pure fantasy.

I personally had a lot of experience flying using my *Phantom Horse* and *Fly* spells and was pretty used to being high in the air. Even so, this situation far exceeded anything I could imagine. My heart was racing.

When I looked overhead, the jellyfish creature emitted a gentle purple light that took over my entire view. The left-hand and right-hand vistas were also mostly crowded by tentacles. The Moonlight Ship we'd boarded and the jellyfish (or "nocturnal monster") were quite different sizes.

It was this size difference that allowed the jellyfish, swimming leisurely in the atmosphere, to carry a twenty-meter-long ship. I mean, I'm sure there was sorcery or magic or something involved, too, but the thing was huge.

"This is amazing. Really amazing. Beyond amazing!" Sedam remained consistently excited. He kept asking all kinds of questions of Canberils and the others, who were supposedly controlling the ship. Sedam scuttled around this way and that to look over every part of the ship he could reach.

"Since we're all the way up here, it's a shame we can't enjoy the scenery." The Moonlight Ship had no cabin. I stuck my head out from the ship's bow and looked down at the ground below, but I couldn't make anything out in the darkness.

"Ahh, Lord...are we there yet?"

Reyha tugged at the hem of my robes. She was sprawled on the floor in her sensational leather armor, a rare sight for her. Even so, she kept her bottom flat on the ground and her legs tucked in demurely.

Her purple eyes looked up at me, moist with tears. Her pointy ears slowly drooped.

"What, you're scared? Just from being in a high place?" Lade asked provocatively, wearing his normal, unfriendly expression.

“S-silence! You would not see me thus, were I to fly with the lord’s magic! How could you ever think I would feel secure swinging around in jellyfish tentacles?!”

Reyha shot back her excuse defiantly, but she only clung to me more and more tightly. Her indignation had no impact whatsoever. But I had to admit, it was cute.

“I apologize to your servant, but it will take another three or four days before we arrive. We’ll land during the daytime for rest.”

Canberils spoke to me as I was lowering Reyha (still clinging to me) onto a nearby bench. One of the guards stood at what looked like the helm—though I had to wonder if nautical terms still applied.

“Three days...that’s fine.”

I had no idea how fast the jellyfish was traveling, but the destination must be much closer than I’d originally thought.

“The castrum is in Shrendal right now,” Canberils explained.

“Oh, is that so? Wait...hold on a second.”

I cocked my head to the side, but Canberils continued, not noticing. “I’ll warn you in advance: The elders want to meet with you as soon as we land. Until then, please don’t speak to any other members of the clan.”

“You mean, don’t talk to anyone about the prophecy, right?”

“Thanks for making it easy. The only people who know about this are the mystic, you, three elders, two warlords, two warchiefs, and those two guards over there. This topic is just too dangerous for the warrior clan as a whole.”

Canberils’s stony face looked like it had endured the weathering of wind and rain. I could tell he was under a lot of stress. The foresight of the mystic, or rather her authority, was that important to the warrior clan.

I nodded and started to ask him a question. “By the way—”

“By the way,” Sedam cut in, suddenly right beside me, “why does

the warrior clan live in this castrum or whatever? Isn't it normally called a town, or a base, or a village?"

"That's because it's not a town or a base, and no one would ever consider it a village." Canberils let out a little sigh. He sounded exhausted, like an elderly man approaching death. "The warrior clan doesn't belong anywhere in this world. We only have places where we must be...and they are where the daemons are."

Three days later, high noon.

The plan was to walk from the Moonlight Ship's landing spot to the castrum. They called this landing spot their harbor. We were surprised again to see that there were three more ship-and-jellyfish setups that had "anchored" there.

We walked along the rocky mountains for a few hours. The winding mountain path eventually approached a valley, surrounded on each side by high cliffs. At the entrance to the valley was a simple defensive wall and gate made of logs, as well as a watchtower.

"So, this is the warrior clan's castrum?" Sedam said, really seeming to enjoy himself.

"That is correct," the mystic replied, smiling. "We welcome you, and give thanks to you for coming all this way."

We waited there for a time, and before long, the gate opened, and many boys and girls came running out at us.

"Oracle!"

"Oracle, welcome home!"

The elf maiden smiled beatifically. "Did you all stay healthy?"

"Yeah! We're all fine!"

The mystic spoke to them gently, as if they were her own children. The rest of the warrior clan looked at her with respect, affinity, and a little fear.

"Okay, everyone! Back to work. We have important things to discuss with our guests!" Canberils spoke, and everyone bowed

obediently and went back inside the gate.

“Aye, Warlord!”

“Let’s prepare a feast!”

Even the warlord had spoken gently to the children for a few minutes. My impression of the clan had only improved.

Guided by the mystic, we stepped into the castrum.

“Look at this...”

“Mmm.”

The first thing to catch my eye was the living quarters. There were a variety of very simple residences lined up in neat rows at the bottom of the valley. They were adorned with cloth and leather depicting geometric patterns. Except for some elaborate decorations, they were the same designs used by the warriors staying in the Castle Getaeus courtyard.

So those weren’t just what they used for camping or temporary housing...

As we proceeded along the bottom of the valley, everything we passed shared the same sort of simple, portable design. Actually, it seemed that even the watermill shed on the small river in the valley could be struck down. The small barns and pens were likewise collapsible.

“Do you mean the warrior barracks—”

“It’s not that surprising, is it? There are clans who follow sheep and cattle. We follow daemons.” Canberils spoke dispassionately.

Now I understood. That’s why he’d mentioned where the castrum was “now” on the Moonlight Ship. They moved from one land to the next, stopping where daemons were expected to appear—probably based on prophecy.

“Just like the name implies, this really is a war camp.”

“Yeah.” Sedam looked around, nodding.

The people in the clan who weren’t wearing that weird armor

sported clothing that resembled the Japanese kimono. While their initial appearance was different, they lived like completely ordinary villagers in this world: spinning thread, washing clothes at the edge of the well, cracking wheat, and so on.

But these people's lives centered on a never-ending hunt for daemons. Even Sedam watched them with both curiosity and sympathy.

Next, the mystic guided us to a larger but still simple residence in the center of the barracks.

It seemed the warrior clan didn't have a culture of sitting in chairs. The interior of the wide space was floored with planks of wood, and we were prompted to sit on beautiful, embroidered cushions. This made me want to take off my shoes at the entrance, but it seemed that was unnecessary.

At the back of the room hung a tapestry of massive, threatening birds with their colorful wings spread wide. It was the warrior clan's coat of arms.

"I am a warrior clan elder, Eads."

"I am Caraon."

"I am Dalegilo."

The three elders sat, their backs to the tapestry. The mystic sat on her knees in a higher position than the elders, facing the tapestry.

The elders were not the geezers I'd imagined. They did show signs of aging, like thinning hair and crow's feet, but all three had maintained strong physiques. They were wearing loose, dark red robes, like monks. While they did bow their heads in respect to us, the dignity in their eyes was that of seasoned war veterans.

"I am the wizard and lord of Castle Getaeus, Geo Margilus. Thank you for your invitation."

I remembered how to act humble, and somehow got through our introductions in a dignified manner, even if I was a nervous wreck inside. At least, I think I came off dignified. Reyha and Sedam seemed uncomfortable behind me.

“Now, Margilus. Getting straight to the point, there are a number of things we want to confirm with you.” Elder Eads began speaking, but a soft voice interrupted him.

“Wait.”

“Yes, Oracle?”

“What is it?”

“What is it, you ask. But this wizard has suffered a great deal of inconvenience due to our disdain. Not only did he generously forgive me for this, but he also traveled a great distance to be of assistance to us.”

“Er...”

The mystic continued to scold the three elders (albeit in a kind and gentle voice). “Should we not start by providing refreshments and expressing our deep gratitude to him? Should we not also ask his forgiveness before stating our requests? When did you forget your manners? When you were young you were most conscientious. My heart aches, wondering if perhaps my teachings of love were insufficient.”

“Eh...eh heh heh. Excuse us.”

“Oracle, w-we humbly beg forgiveness...”

We sat silently.

Just as a reminder, the mystic looked like a beautiful, black-haired teenager. This seeming girl was scolding battle-hardened elderly warriors, and the elders were cowering and bowing in apology like schoolboys.

It was extremely awkward for us. Canberils and Lade were likewise sweating bullets.

In all, the scolding took about five minutes.

The elders did what the mystic said and dropped their posture very low while serving us tea and sweets and apologizing profusely.

“Hmm. Now...may we get started, Lord Wizard?”

“Let’s,” I said. “You’ve been very welcoming. I am quite interested to hear what you have to say.”

“Most kind of you. Now, before we get to the point... I am very sorry, but I would like to try just one more time to see if you have a

reaction to daemons. We would like you to undergo another inquisition.”

“What?”

In fact, I had expected this.

Previously, Canberils and the diviner he’d brought to my castle had conducted an inquisition. They’d used a crystal ball with daemon blood sealed inside to judge whether the holder was influenced by daemons based on its reaction.

In other words, the elders still suspected me. Naturally, when the mystic heard this, she raised her green eyes and was ready to scold them again. The elders saw this and desperately tried to appease me.

“Granted, we know it is impolite! Please, indulge us. This is our way!”

“You’re right. It should be done, just in case. I will feel more at ease, too, if you inspect me carefully.”

I’d never intended to refuse, so I quickly agreed. I had to defend them from another tongue-lashing!

The crystal ball they presented was much larger than the Daemon’s Sight used in the previous inquisition, but luckily, it ended with the same result. The lump of reddish-brown blood in the crystal ball seemed to dislike being near me and went berserk.

“It is just as reported...”

“I’ve never seen such a response before.”

“Indeed... You are certainly not a leechd one, nor a daemonist.”

“You’ve seen it,” the mystic intoned, a touch dire. “Now hurry and apologize to the wizard.”

“Well, er, that’s not important,” I said. “I understood that this was necessary.”

I somehow managed to soothe the mystic, who sounded like a mother scolding her children for mischief. After that, we were finally able to get into real discussions.

“As the clan elders, we desire to ensure our oracle’s prophecies return to normal.”

“We need your knowledge for this, Lord Wizard.”

“Lord Wizard, if you don’t mind, we hoped you would take a look at the principal icon used to channel our prophecies—in other words, the daemon corpse that our ancestors secured five hundred years ago.”

“I see.”

They were still unaware of my magic’s principles, as well as the gate that made it possible. And they probably supposed that I had some sort of connection to an Epicenter (even if I wasn’t a daemon myself).

“In the end, we may ask you to participate in a ritual of prophecy directly.”

“As a matter of fact,” I said, “that is my strongest hope.”

Researching the prophecy offered an important chance to learn about the King of Daemons. If they hadn’t brought up my being involved in the ritual themselves, I probably would have asked.

And beyond that, there remained the ultimate mystery about myself. What was a Watcher? Why was I transported to this world? I wondered if I could get a step closer to finding out.

As his title suggested, Rimeydal the Creator had made this world from nothing.

According to myth, Rimeydal first created the heavens and the earth. He created humans, and let them live upon the earth. Then he created elves and dwarves to help the humans.

The people dwelled in prosperity, and for a time, things were good. But the people were fertile and multiplied. When their numbers grew too large, divisions took hold, and they fought with one another. The fighting continued without end.

Thus, Rimeydal created death...and the netherworld, where all the dead were sent to dwell. Rimeydal, satisfied with the world he had created, granted the authority to rule over all nations to one superior group, and disappeared on a journey to a place unknown.

The group to whom he'd granted his authority now reigned as the royal family of Shrendal.

This was the creation myth the way I'd heard it. Since it justified the rule of the Shrendal royal family, it was unclear how much of it was true.

In any case, we couldn't afford to neglect this type of background information in our quest to sway the fate of the world. There had to be something hidden somewhere in the myths of Sedia about daemons and Watchers.

I decided to start by asking the warrior clan. "Do you have any information about creation myths? Knowing the truth behind them would be ideal."

"Mmm. We do know about the Divine King," answered Caraon, a white-haired elder with a bit of a belly. The other two nodded.

"The Divine King? You mean the one that became the first Epicenter?"

And if the legends were true, that king was also an ancestor of Diane and the Schultz clan. Information about the Divine King was connected to the Epicenter and therefore the mystery of all daemonic phenomena.

"It seems that some things have been left out of the creation myth as espoused by the royal family of Shrendal. Among the missing details is any mention of the Divine King that the warrior clan knows. They say the Divine King was an aristocrat with the blood of Rimeydal."

"Well... The lineage of Rimeydal is a big deal." Sedam slid up closer until he was sitting next to me. His eyes were sparkling.

"Well, how about the true elf, our mystic, created by the hand of Rimeydal himself?"

"Wait...are you saying we're actually staring at the truth of the myth with our own eyes?"

Now that I thought about it, he was right. She'd said that when we first met her. If it was true, then we wouldn't need to do any research or reasoning.

I sat up straight and asked the beautiful elf maiden point blank.

"I am very sorry," she said. "Only the first generation knows a

time when Rimeydal was really there. I am of the second generation. I am not even five hundred years old. The knowledge and magic I inherited from the first generation is incomplete.”

Sedam looked let down. “Hrmmm...”

I poked Sedam in the ribs for sighing. “Er, you really don’t need to apologize,” I assured the mystic, who was already bowing her head in apology. It figured things wouldn’t be that easy.

Sedam wasn’t discouraged in the slightest. “But the knowledge you *do* have must still be enormous! For example, perhaps you know the cause of why this Divine King, a descendant of Rimeydal no less, became an Epicenter.” He asked the mystic questions like he was a fish and she was a source of water.

“I heard about that in pieces from the first generation and the sage. The Divine King came into contact with Rimeydal’s knowledge.”

“Oh?”

Sedam leaned in more. He was eating this up. The elders didn’t look very happy, but I was curious, too. It was certainly an important point.

“I will tell you only what I know...”

She spoke in her melodious voice and told us the following alternative legend.

After Rimeydal left...

The people founded Shrendal and expelled the Divine King to the east. The Divine King built his own kingdom there, but in his heart of hearts, he hoped someday to follow after Rimeydal. He searched for the secret that would fulfill his heart’s desire.

What he found was Qadr Brueys, the great library from the age of gods, built by Rimeydal and left in the care of the first true elf. There, he ready many things—and the things he read drove him mad. The library housed all of Rimeydal’s own knowledge, stored so that it might be given to humanity in some distant future, when they might need his wisdom.

The two most important books in the library were called *The Opening of the Universe* and *The Meaning of Life*. In these two books were written opposing truths: the truths outside this world, and the truths inside this world. After reading *The Meaning of Life*, the Divine King acquired the power to control the world. Once he knew the truths outside of this world written in *The Opening of the Universe*, he became drunk with despair and hatred.

The hatred of the Divine King, a being descended directly from Rimeydal, was terrifying. The hatred grew and grew. It took hold of him, and became him, and he became hatred. He became an Epicenter, and drew hatred from a different world into our own.

“This is everything I know about the Divine King.” Having finished her tale, the mystic cast her eyes down, as if in mourning.

“Hmm...interesting. And after that, the first brood event occurred from the Epicenter the Divine King generated?”

I had already come across a plethora of new vocabulary since arriving here. And some long-standing questions had also been answered.

The library from the age of gods...placed in the care of a true elf, one of whom is sitting before us. So, it really existed...

Sedam was looking up at the ceiling, like he'd reached his maximum capacity for wonder. I'd heard once that before he was born, his father, a scholar, had been trying to prove the existence of Qadr Brueys. Most believed the library to be a fable. To be honest, I was excited, too.

If we knew the contents of the two books in the library of the age of gods, we would be able to determine the true reason why the Divine King had become an Epicenter. That might tell us how to completely rid this world of daemons forever.

But then again...

“Oracle, you must know where the library and books reside.”

“Yes. Although I am admittedly merely a vestige of the first

generation's magic. My knowledge and my powers are nowhere near the heights of the first generation."

"That can't be helped," said one of the elders quickly. "And for it, you bear no shame."

"The mystic has led the warrior clan and protected this world from daemons for five hundred years." The elders were quick to speak in defense of the mystic, whose eyes were downcast yet again. Naturally, they looked accusingly at us, so I swiftly decided to apologize.

"As I mentioned before, you're not the one who has anything to be sorry about. Rather, it is we who should apologize for our frankness."

"Hardly..."

"You have shared your secrets with us, so I would also like to share what I know. Perhaps if we combine my knowledge with the knowledge of the warrior clan, we can discover some new truths."

I corrected my posture and began my story. Although it did seem like we would have no choice but to find a way to go to Qadr Brueys in the end.

(If this was an RPG, there wouldn't be any doubt about it. We were definitely going. That place had "plot-critical dungeon" written all over it.)

Before we went, we naturally needed to get as close to the truth as possible. The warrior clan and the mystic kept their promise and provided us with all their information without hiding anything. In that case, I needed to lay my own cards on the table.

That meant coming clean about the Watcher, explaining the Gate of Magic, and revealing that I'd come from a different world.

"It's a long story," I said. "I'll try to give you the short version."

"Please tell us."

I couldn't help sounding a bit defensive from the beginning. The elf maiden cocked her head to the side and smiled as she listened calmly.

"I've been lying about this to everyone, but the truth is that I am not from this world. One day, I met someone called a Watcher, who transported me to this world. To put it bluntly: I'm a being from

another planet.”

No one responded.

There was a possibility that they'd suddenly disdain me as something strange and foreign. An unknowable Other. I was scared and anxious, but I held on to hope. My trust in my companions provided support that held me up.

One of the elders looked deeply skeptical. “Suddenly, I have doubts.”

“Now, now. There is no reason for the wizard to lie to us,” said the mystic.

Although they looked puzzled, their expressions were not those of denial or disgust.

I turned to look at Sedam behind me (well, next to me, after all his scooting) on one side and Reyha on the other. When our eyes met, they both tilted their heads. Rather than anger or suspicion, the looks on their faces seemed to say, “And? Keep going.”

Excuse me, can you tell I'm taking a leap of faith and pouring my heart out here?

“Umm, well. I'm sorry I didn't tell you both before.”

“Hmm? Well, yeah, I wish you hadn't kept something so interesting from me for so long.” Sedam didn't seem to care in the least.

“That's not what I meant.”

Actually, part of me wondered if his interest in the unknown maybe went a little too far sometimes. But then, I'd met him several months ago. We'd built trust from working together all this time.

“That is the lord I know. It is a fitting history for our Orly. So, you were born a noble.” I'm not sure how Reyha got that out of what I'd said, but her eyes were sparkling.

“I'm...not a noble, though.”

I guess it wasn't that strange for them to react like this.

But after they looked at me like that, it would be hard to break the news to them that in my former world I was just a normal company employee and not a wizard...While I was relieved at the reactions of my two friends, I felt bad that I was still hiding things.

“Given all your blunders,” Lade chortled, “they make more sense now that we know you’re not from this world.”

“And that’s why you’re so soft...er, why you can think in a different way than normal,” said Canberils.

I was surprised to hear the two of them pipe in on my origins so casually. Lade looked away, like he always did, and Canberils distorted his mouth into what I thought was an uncomfortable attempt at a smile.

“Thanks...” If I read them correctly, they were accepting and encouraging me in their own ways. Surprisingly, I felt some warm emotions.

“Go on, wizard.”

“E-excuse me. Anyway, this Watcher is capable of exerting extraordinary power between this world and other worlds. I’ve lately begun to wonder if it’s because he has some sort of connection to Rimeydal.”

“I have not heard this name in any myths I know... It certainly does sound like an existence similar to Rimeydal.”

So, the word “Watcher” didn’t bring up any hits. Well, I still had the worldly and cosmic truths hidden at the library of the age of gods to look forward to.

“Finally, inside of me, I harbor an existence very similar to an Epicenter. I call it the Gate of Magic. The difference is that it doesn’t connect to the daemon world, but rather, it is a gate to the chaotic realm.”

“Th-that...”

“Does that mean that the prophecy mistook the lord wizard’s gate for an Epicenter?”

The elders came to the same conclusion I had. It was only natural, since they desperately hoped to be rid of the possibility that the collective consciousness of the daemons had given them a false prophecy.

“There is a possibility of a misidentification. However, this prophecy mentions the wizard by name. This has never happened before in five hundred years of performing the ritual,” the mystic pointed out calmly. Then she frowned. “Did you say ‘Gate of Magic’? That is very similar to a prophecy that the first generation received

from the sage. According to the sage, the art that connects this world with other worlds belongs to Rimeydal.”

“Rimeydal again...” After listening to the mystic, I started imagining that my theory of magic was something close to the library’s hidden truths.

“In the end, all roads lead to the library from the age of gods.”

“Yes...”

Once we finished our necessary tasks, we would have to start looking for the library.

With that established, we chatted with each other about our experiences with legends and what we knew. It took a while.

Once we were out of topics, the mystic nodded toward us. “For the time being, let us end this exchange of opinions here.”

“Agreed.”

“Very well. Now I would like you to actually witness my ritual.”

I was finally at the stage of verifying the warrior clan’s ritual of connecting with the daemonic overmind. Honestly, I wasn’t planning on just watching. I intended to touch the King of Daemons myself, at the same time.

Chapter 14

We didn't go straight to the ritual from the meeting.

The mystic and the elders wanted to, but I received one day of grace. The reason, of course, was that I had spells to prepare.

The warrior clan offered us the biggest and fanciest of their residences as our guestroom. There, Sedam wrote down the information we'd acquired that day. Reyha prepared tea.

"I already thought you were too incredible to be true, but to think you were from a different world. Is everyone in that world a wizard like you?"

I stopped thumbing through my spellbook at Sedam's question. I lay down on the embroidered carpet and looked at him out of the corner of my eye. "No... I think it's quite rare..."

"Another world... I wonder what kind of wonderful world you came from, Lord?" Reyha asked as she poured the warrior clan's tea, which had a strong and unique scent. Her purple eyes were sparkling.

"My world?" I sat up and scratched my jaw, thinking about it as I took my tea. At least where I lived, my world was more peaceful and prosperous than this one. On a global scale, though, it was full of problems.

For example, science, political systems, and ideologies. The preexisting conditions such as daemons were fundamentally different, but in a way, it was more advanced than this world.

Even though there was magic and sorcery, this world had the same laws of physics, and the human spirit was pretty much the same. There was also the possibility that, with time, there would be an industrial revolution and people's thoughts would develop, too.

Some of the protagonists that I'd read about in portal fantasies or isekai fiction used the knowledge of their own time and place to reform society.

My first job is to protect people from daemons. But how can I achieve that? Does the Watcher want me to develop this world? For example, if

there was a system where a country could guarantee a certain quality life for its citizens in this world, maybe there wouldn't be so many miserable children like the sorcerer-soldiers of the guild.

But then again...

I struggled to see a way forward. Leading the world to a better path was far beyond my ability. I became depressed, thinking about it all. I sighed, still imagining what intentions the Watcher might have had for me.

"My lord?"

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Hmm? Oh, sorry. I was just thinking."

I felt awkward after clamming up without answering Reyha's question. I started sipping my tea.

The next morning...

"Okay, done." I closed my spellbook. I'd finished charging *Mind Wall* and *Perfect Resistance*, both spells that I didn't use often.

"Then let's go! I'm going, you're going, we're all going. C'mon." Sedam practically pulled me out of the room, cheerful as can be.

"What's gotten into you?"

Lade, who was waiting for us outside, led us to the site of the prophecy ritual. I saw how excited Sedam was and pretended not to notice him murmuring to himself.

We soon reached a valley that looked like someone had ripped a mountain in two. There was a cave in the rocky mountain right behind the warrior clan's castrum where the ritual was to take place.

"Sorry to have kept you all waiting," I said.

In front of the cave stood the mystic, of course, as well as several warrior clan women dressed in the same red and white outfits. Apparently, my words served as a signal for them to bow deeply.

Lade said, "Try not to get in your own way," and left us. The elders weren't there. It seemed like men weren't normally allowed.

“From here, I would like to ask for only the wizard to accompany me,” the true elf maiden said to us in her captivating voice.

“I knew it.” Sedam put his hand to his forehead and groaned.

Sometimes, reality bites.

“Sorry, buddy... I’ll try to tell you every detail later.” I patted him on the shoulder.

“You better. I want to hear everything.” Sedam wasn’t a bad guy. He nodded and took a step back.

“Now, wizard. Please wait over here.” One of the maidens held something out. Upon closer inspection, it was a wooden tool with red thread wrapped around it many times...a spool.

“What’s this for?”

“To mark your path, so that you can return to this world from that of the daemon’s consciousness. Never let this string break.”

After explaining, the mystic took the end of the string on the spool I held and handed it to Reyha.

“Er, what’s this for?”

“This string is strongest when it is held by a woman who cares about the person going in. You are suitable.”

Puzzled at first, after Reyha heard the explanation, she looked at me. She sat down right there and hung her head.

“Lord. I, Reyhanalka Haiklus Si, swear to protect this thread with my life!”

“I hope you will...”

There was certainly no question about her loyalty. I didn’t know if this thread was just a prop, or if it really did have some sort of sorcerous meaning, but if Reyha said she would, I knew she would protect it.

Meanwhile, I could hear Sedam’s murmuring as he closely watched the spool. “Hmm... Taking a red thread to another world. It’s like the story of Olrol and Chalis.”

“Could you explain that? In detail.”

The whole thing was strange. A journey into a dimension of the mind? It was almost like eldritch horror. But if you weren’t ready for

things to get a little cosmic, then you'd never be able to play a horror RPG like *The Call of Cthulhu*.

"It's like the story of Olrol and Chalis."

The tale Sedam summarized was almost the same story as the earthly myth of Theseus and the Minotaur.

A warrior named Olrol went into the underworld to kill a monster.

Chalis, his lover, gave him a thread so he wouldn't get lost in the underworld.

Olrol made it deep into the underworld and killed the monster, then followed the thread to return to the world.

"I see. It really is similar."

"I perform the ritual in the way that the first generation and the sage taught me, but this is the first time I've heard about that myth," the mystic murmured, nodding as she stared down at the spool in her hand. I didn't volunteer the extra nuance that I found it similar not just to Sedian myth, but tales of ancient Greece.

I wondered if it meant that even in different worlds, human societies tended to resemble one other. Anyway, the important detail was that I had to make sure that I didn't drop this thread or let it get cut off.

"Reyha, I'm counting on you. Hold on tight, will you? Don't ever let go of me," I asked her again.

"Chalis... I am Chalis... Er, yes. Of course, my lord!"

She wasn't just acting. I started to feel a little weak, but I shook it off.

"Now I'm really ready."

"Are you sure?"

I cast a number of defensive spells on both myself and the mystic. She probably didn't realize it, but in *D&B*, these spells could defend even against epic-level enemies and their mental attacks.

"I-I will be waiting here the whole time," Reyha assured me.

The mystic and I entered the cave while Reyha cried desperately, holding tightly to the end of the red thread.

The cave was so narrow that we couldn't walk side by side. Soon, we could no longer hear Reyha's voice or see the light of the entrance.

"What's this...?" No sooner had I started thinking about using my light spell than I realized that I could see faintly inside the cave. There was some sort of floating presence in the space, emitting a faint glow.

The two red strings from the spools were also glowing faintly.

A red light stretching from the entrance into the abyss. There was something romantic and whimsical about it.

"It's the light of pure mana."

"This is mana? Am I able to perceive it now? No, it's not quite the same..."

"The mana in this place is especially potent, enough to see with the naked eye," the mystic told me.

"I see..." I wondered if the land here had always been like that, or if this was something the warrior clan had done to it. In any case, this was a valuable experience.

We continued down into the quiet, dark, narrow cave. It was like diving deep into the sea. Wait...this whole descent was probably part of the ritual, a physical way of emulating the process of touching the daemon's consciousness.

It felt like less than ten minutes had passed, but I couldn't really tell. We reached the end before I felt tired.

The space was about the size of a small classroom. In the center lay an eerie object.

"This is the cornerstone."

What the mystic called the cornerstone was, in fact, the torso of some ancient daemon that had undergone mummification or a similar process. Its head—which was far too large for the torso—was covered in horns and strange, tactile organs. The torso was covered in cuts.

It was supported not by its two broken arms, but stakes that pierced its shoulders, back, sides and other places. There were also stakes surrounding the torso, closing it in. They seemed to be wooden, but they were all illuminated by a pale light, which contrasted starkly with the jet-black daemon flesh.

The stakes were all connected with a net draped over the thing's remains, as if trapping the daemon in. Clearly, it had somehow been sealed away.

"We will now use the cornerstone to carry out the prophetic ritual," the mystic told me quietly. There was something odd about her figure against the pale light emitted from the stakes.

"These stakes...are they wards or something?"

"Yes. These are branches from the sacred tree. They seal in the spirit of the daemon and connect me to that spirit."

According to the mystic's explanation, the sacred tree was a source of mana, and that mana worked as a medium to connect spiritual wavelengths.

"This is only possible because I am a true elf, a species that has handled mana across the ages."

"Oh, don't worry. I didn't plan on conducting the same ritual as you. Instead, I would like to use this. What do you think?"

She looked at me, confused.

I showed her the ESP Medal. The prophetic ritual was what connected the mystic to the daemon. In that case, if she were to touch the ESP Medal in the middle of that ritual, I would probably be able to get a look into the daemon's spirit, too.

"That is...totally unexpected."

This response to my request was the first time I'd ever heard the elf maiden use a dumbfounded voice. "Perhaps it's impossible?"

"Not quite... Honestly, I have no idea. But from what I've heard, I think it might be possible..."

“I know it’s rude to look into someone’s heart. But could you help me try this?” I bowed to her as I asked this favor, flustered.

“I can’t refuse. But if it looks like you are in danger, I will end the ritual immediately.”

“I understand. I’ll be in your debt.”

The mystic took a package from her bosom. When she removed the wrapping, there was an item within—a number of small bells connected together. It looked exactly like the kagura bells that Shinto shrine maidens used in Japan. She lifted it with her white hands, and rang it.

Ting!

The clear sound echoed through the narrow space.

...to a place above the heavens to the palm of my hand...

The elf maiden was kneeling in front of the creepy daemon corpse. She chanted, her voice flowing like that of someone reciting poetry. The jingle-jangle of the kagura bells was a fine complement to her chanting.

... the princess who stands not before god, forsaken by heaven and earth, realms never to meet...

I couldn’t really tell what the chant meant. Sometimes I felt like I knew some of the words, but when I tried to understand the meaning, they ran together. When I tried to pick some words up, I would miss others, ensuring the overall meaning eluded me.

With this kind of setup, even if we were on Earth, I would’ve been certain a ghost or two would show up.

I stood behind her, examining the daemonic cornerstone set into the wall directly in front of the entrance. It was of a very particular size, and covered in carved runes. It could only serve one purpose.

It was a door.

The important components here were the cornerstone, the sacred tree, and that door. Each time the warrior clan moved, they carried all of these with them. According to the mystic’s explanation, once the

ritual began, the door would open, and she would connect to the consciousness of the daemon.

I held up the ESP Medal and aimed it toward the mystic. I focused on the chant and melody, zeroing in on her thoughts, and before long, I was peering into her heart. The ESP Medal normally didn't work on a person who was using *Mind Wall*, but a person could choose to allow a friend to make contact.

"Hmm?"

The moment I felt the elf's consciousness flow into me, the light around us changed.

I could no longer see the shadow or shape of the cornerstone or the sacred tree. The door...was there.

I should probably explain. What was supposed to be a slab of stone had suddenly turned into a gaping hole.

"Is that... Lord Wizard?"

The mystic stood up and looked at me, surprised.

"If we are here together, it means that you are touching the consciousness of the daemon through my heart, right?"

"It seems that way."

I wasn't exactly reading the mystic's consciousness. It was more like the sensation when I entered my inner world to use my spells. In both cases, I used a person's consciousness to enter another world. Even if this time it was her consciousness, they were still similar experiences.

"As yet we stand outside the entrance to the daemon's will. From here, we pass through the gate and go down deep. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

I swallowed hard, gripping the spool with clammy hands. The red thread continued up out of the abyss behind us.

I followed behind the mystic and went through the door. The light of ambient mana from before was gone, but even though we were surrounded by darkness, for some reason, I could feel my way in the

dark.

On the other side of the door was a cave big enough to walk side by side. The floor and walls felt more like hard clay than stone. The cave was on a slope, and there was a warm wind flowing all around us.

This was definitely one of the creepiest adventures I'd ever been on, and it was supposedly dangerous, but I didn't feel afraid for some reason. If anything, it really felt like a dream. Well, I was using the mystic as a medium to enter into the world of daemons' will. It was the same sort of spiritual world as my inner world. In extreme terms, it really felt no different from dreaming.

"I'm sorry, can you wait here for a moment?"

"What's wrong?"

I remembered that there was something I had to do, despite my fuzzy head. When I called out to the mystic, she stopped. I closed my eyes.

There was silence.

"Uh, hello? Wizard?"

It was exactly ten seconds. The mystic called out to me while I was meditating. The results were perfect, so I opened my eyes.

"Oh, sorry. I was just experimenting. It's okay now."

"Is that so...?"

The mystic tilted her head to the side and then went back to walking. I was sorry for doing that to her, but we were already in the consciousness of the daemons—in other words, hostile territory. I couldn't tell her the results of my experiment out loud.

We continued down into the cave, which mostly looked the same throughout. My sense of time disappeared on the path, where the only variety consisted of the repeated breathing and footsteps of the elf maiden. I had the red spool of thread in my left hand. Just knowing that Reyha was on the other end of the string was a comfort I couldn't put it into words.

In order to keep my wits about me, I thought about the myth mentioned earlier. Olrol and Chalis had the exact same structure as the ancient Greek myth on earth. Despite this, I couldn't bring myself to think that there was a monster waiting for me deep in this cave...

If the place we were in right now was another world known as the daemonic consciousness, then the situation was similar to that of heroes visiting the underworld or netherworld in so many myths.

In Japan, Izanagi went down into the netherworld to bring back the dead Izanami.

Orpheus descended to the underworld for his dead wife, Eurydice.

There were plenty of myths with this same theme, but the common factor among all the living who ventured into the realm of the dead was that they broke the taboo of seeing things that they shouldn't.

I wondered if I was doing the same thing with this adventure.

"We're almost there."

"Oh...good, okay."

The voice of the mystic brought my consciousness back from nearly drowning in a sea of thought. I hurried to catch up to her.

"This really is a strange atmosphere."

I noticed that the wind flowing from farther down the cave had started to feel cold. There was a small light I could now see in the darkness that I'd thought would last forever. The light was a cloudy white, like an overcast sky. Even that was better than the dark, and it spread farther. Both the mystic and I quickened our step, thinking that it must be the exit from the cave.

"Here?"

A warm breeze hit my face.

What I saw spread before me could only be described as a raging ocean of mud. We'd finally reached the exit of the endless cave to find ourselves on the shore of a muddy sea. With each wave, stones of various sizes piled up on top of each other.

This wasn't real mud, or even a real sea. And yet there were "waves" that rushed to our feet from the reddish-brown "ocean." When I looked closer, each drop that splashed onto the black stones was a tiny daemon.

They looked like deformed dolls, but they were definitely imps and fiends. I didn't think they were real, living daemons. The countless tiny daemons splattering about either lost their shape, like clay melting in water, or soon returned to the ocean.

But that wasn't all. There was a giant human-like figure towering above everything, big enough to cover the ocean's leaden sky. (Or was it a ceiling?)

It was similar to the supermassive daemon that I'd seen in Filsand. Its legs were short, and both the arms and torso were abnormally long. The slender body was hunched over, and both hands reached the surface of the sea. The head was mostly round, and there was a single torn line where the eyes and mouth should have been. It felt similar to the jet-black, spherical nests that called the daemons from the other world.

I was already confused about the sense of scale. The distance from that humanoid creature seemed to be several hundreds of meters or even tens of kilometers, and the size seemed to change every time I looked, from a skyscraper's height to a mountain's. To be honest, if I hadn't already felt like I was in the middle of a dream, I would have been going crazy right about now.

Well. If this is a Cthulhu adventure, then that was my SAN check. Guess I got a good roll...

But maybe the reason I was still somewhat lucid was the *Mind Wall* spell. In any case, from the looks of it, the daemon's existences really were like those of ants or bees.

Fortunately, the gigantic humanoid wasn't doing anything except standing there, and it didn't seem interested in us at all.

"Is this hell?" I only dared let my words slip out because I'd already confirmed that the humanoid wasn't moving.

"This muddy sea—no, this space, can be called the spirit of all daemons. That human-like figure is the part of it that is somewhat orderly, equivalent to the daemons' consciousness or personality," the mystic explained. Her voice was stiff.

“So, that humanoid thing is the King of Daemons...”

It was as I expected, or actually, in the end, it didn't seem like the daemons' consciousness was capable of mutual communication. Even if the daemons did all share a single mind, humans understanding it was a separate issue.

However, how was the mystic going to get information out of something so alien?

“It looks like something will happen soon.”

“Oh?”

We crouched in the shadows of rocks to hide our presence from the King of Daemons. I don't think it was because it heard our voices, but the giant figure started to slowly lift its head.

“Raaah... Raaagh...”

So, that was the voice of the King of Daemons? I couldn't really distinguish it from the sound of the waves and the wind. Droning its eerie call, it started to shake its human-like head. Two fathomless black holes opened on its skull (maybe eye sockets) and focused on something.

The sky (if that's what it was) was constantly changing color from gray to earthen and back. The part that the King of Daemons focused on started to quiver, and soon morphed into a meaningful shape.

“Is that...me?!”

In the corner of the sky (I'm calling it that) where the King of Daemons was focusing, a black and white figure appeared.

It was the inside of a cave somewhere. A robed man was holding a staff. It was a familiar figure...me. The perspective shifted to a nearby aristocrat who was screaming and carrying on, and then to an altar made from the corpses of daemons.

“Those are the memories of the daemons. When the daemons ‘remember’ scenes of the past, these black and white images appear.”

“If these are memories...and all daemons share a consciousness,

then they all have the same memory.”

If I traced my own memory back, this must have been when I was battling Baron Corbal in Relis City. And if Baron Corbal was also there...

“So that’s the memory of the daemonist priest?”

The priest was the only one who could have created a memory from that perspective. That meant that some daemonists could share their memories with daemons.

In one corner of the sky, the mouth of the baron, filled with despair, grew even bigger. That mouth opened and closed over and over again.

“Margilus! Margilus!”

I’d thought they were only images with no sounds, but there was a voice that was neither human nor mechanical in the wind, calling my name.

“Margilus! Margilus!”

“I, too, saw this memory in which your name was spoken. After this, an image of an Epicenter deep in the valley of the Endless Forest appeared. That’s where the misunderstanding happened...”

But for some reason, the image that played back in the sky was not of Baron Corbal and me fighting. This same image of the baron calling my name played back over and over again.

Was it possible that the priest’s memory had been edited, so that the mystic would see it?

“Oh, look.”

As I was thinking to myself, the towering humanoid tilted its round, protruding head in a way that felt deeply...unrealistic. A different image appeared, as if he had been adjusting his line of vision.

“What is it this time...?”

This image was drawn with a light contrast, like an ink painting. It was a scene in which an army of daemons got wiped out by a huge

explosion.

“Is this...the battle at Filsand?”

The image continued to play in gloomy shades.

There was a scene where an imp was blown to dust. There was a scene in which a fiend, crawling on the ground, was tossed in the air by a giant's broom. In one scene, a fallen giant's head was looking up at a horse floating in the sky. There was a man in robes riding on that horse.

It was me.

“From the perspective of the daemons, I'm a bad guy...”

“Raaaagh...!”

“Margilus! Margilus!”

At some point, the monitor in the sky showed me from a number of different angles. The call of the King of Daemons, dripping with hatred for me, filled the air.

“I'm the one who destroyed the daemonic legion and their nests...”

From my research so far, there was no way that daemons could recognize an individual. For example, on a battlefield, daemons might behave in a way that targeted a strong warrior or commanders. But, that was only a reaction to the human's role. It was the same as how no matter how much humans observed ants, even if they could distinguish the soldier ants from the worker ants, they couldn't tell the difference between individuals.

I thought about this strange place and the intentions of the daemons while huddling with the elf maiden in the shadow of the rocks. I directed my questions to her.

“Actually seeing this place makes me realize... The daemons are far too different from us. Even if they are aware of me as an individual, isn't it a bit unnatural for a daemon to come up with a strategy of manipulating information in order to defeat me? It's just too human.”

“I think so, too. But—”

“You're both right.”

Out of nowhere, there came a third voice.

Surprised, we looked up and saw something that we hadn't even

sensed approaching. It was another humanoid. This one was pure white. Completely monochrome. It didn't have eyes or a mouth, but there was definitely a voice coming from its head...a human voice.

"Welcome." It spoke pleasantly. "How very nice to meet you. The Great Wizard Geo Margilus, here at last."

Its entire body was smooth and without definition. It clearly had limbs and a head, but there was no sign of a human-like skeleton. The size was just barely within the human range.

It was a completely stark white...thing. If I'd come across something like this while walking at night on Earth, I definitely would've fainted.

"I do apologize for my appearance." The thing continued to speak as if it had a mouth. It was a young voice.

"Wh-who are you?!" The elf maiden asked in a sharp voice, jumping in front of me, as if to protect me.

"I'm sorry, but I won't be telling you my name. I'm just an old daemonist," the monochrome thing bowed elegantly to accompany its cheeky response. A daemonist? So that meant it was once a human (although there was also the possibility of dwarf or elf). Just based on its appearance, I didn't get the sense that it was one of those urban legend monsters. Humans probably looked like this at times.

"I see..." No sense dwelling on logic. We were in an ominous place outside the boundaries of the human world. It would be better to talk to this daemonist than to try and take on the King of Daemons. It towered over the muddy sea like a mountain.

"So, are you the man behind the curtain?" I asked him.

"M-me? No way." He laughed at my question, looking over at me.

Mmm. I didn't really even know what curtain I was talking about. For the time being, I just figured I would toss out questions and try to fish for information. I had calmed down enough to try that much, at least.

"It's not that dramatic. Well, except I did actually have a hand in the information manipulation you mentioned before," the monochrome thing replied. There was no way to confirm if he was telling the truth, but I decided to believe him for now.

Setting that aside, what should I be doing with this man in front of me?

I should probably try to get as much information that we don't know about the daemons as possible.

"Then let me ask you—"

"Lord Wizard," the mystic warned me, grabbing hold of my robes. "You shouldn't get involved with such a dubious monster..."

"No, let's think of this as a great opportunity."

She was right. it was dubious and dangerous. But if we didn't get this information now, then I didn't know why we were there in the first place. This might be something I was never supposed to see, but still.

"Well that's a relief to hear," the monochrome monster said, amused.

"There is a lot I want to ask you. First of all, do you have considerable influence over the daemons? For example, are you able to start and stop brood events?"

"Heh heh..." His monochrome body shook at my question. It seemed he was laughing. However, if the answer was *yes*, then there was something I had to do no matter what. "You're overestimating me. The only influence I have is being able to direct a smidgen of their consciousness and memory. Basically, we are their followers and servants."

"So, that means you help encourage activities that open Epicenters so the daemons can destroy the humans as quickly as possible?"

"I do believe I detect some resentment in your voice, but in a nutshell, that's right."

I felt nothing *but* resentment. But that discussion was for another day. "I've always wanted to ask a daemonist... The daemons are supposed to destroy all humans, right? Even if you had a good experience using the daemons' power temporarily, as a human, you will eventually be destroyed, too, right?"

There was silence.

Somewhere along the line, the mystic had stopped complaining, and was now attentively listening to our discussion. Her green eyes were full of both nervousness and interest. Who wouldn't be interested?

His answer to the question was simple. "Well, of course. Your point being?"

“So you want both humans and yourself to be destroyed?”

“Naturally. Daemonists hate humans—themselves included!—and this world. We hate everything, from the bottom of our hearts. We hate humanity so much we can’t stand it... That’s the kind of person who becomes a daemonist.” The monochrome monster spread his arms and spoke proudly. I’d thought that I might get somewhere with him, but he was bonkers.

But I couldn’t give up yet. He seemed to be moving around here freely, and had some sort of influence over the King of Daemons, so he must be a central figure among the daemonists.

“So, is there really no room for discussion or compromise? For example, completely separating the daemon and human realms so they don’t come in contact...?”

“Oh, come now, Geo! You want to have a *discussion*, after personally slaughtering over ten thousand daemons?” He spat out his words in a spiteful tone. “You think this is a *negotiation*?”

“The daemons were invading. We just defended ourselves. But...if apologizing for the slaughter will help smooth things over, then I will.”

Although I felt indignation, I brushed it aside and continued the conversation. I knew how I would respond in the worst-case scenario. But I didn’t want to use that option yet.

“Hah! Easy, Geo. I’m just joking. The daemons don’t care if they are killed. To them, it feels like nothing more than a mosquito bite. However, the great wizard bit too hard to be a mere bug.” The monochrome being raised his fingerless hands in the air and gestured to the King of Daemons.

“Raaahhh... Raaagh...!”

The eerie sound echoed in my bones. At first, I thought it might be the sound of the wind, but when I listened closer, I clearly understood that it was a voice of hatred.

“It’s truly angry...but I don’t see any chance of raising a Daemon Calix to open an Epicenter anytime soon. It’s quite a problem.”

I wondered if he was finally speaking some truth. If he was, it meant that there wouldn’t be any large-scale daemon broods for a while...

“Now, I’ve answered most of your questions, right? Might I ask

something now? I've been waiting a very long time for this." The monstrous daemonist took a step closer. What did he want to ask me?

"That's fine. I'll answer if I can."

"Just one question, your lordship." The monochrome being bowed pretentiously once again. "How about you join us, so we can wipe out all the humans together?"

"You want me to become a daemonist?"

"Whether or not you become a daemonist is up to you. What matters is that you use those meteors of yours to blow up as many towns and villages as you can."

I didn't answer.

I'd only half-anticipated that question. Of course, the only possible answer was no, but I wanted to keep the conversation going and get some more information.

"What is the benefit to me in joining forces with you?"

"The only benefit is...you won't be destroyed immediately."

"Huh?!"

A crescent-shaped imperfection opened on his monochrome face.

It was a smile.

"Lord Wizard!"

As if the mystic's sharp voice was a signal, "they" appeared on cue. Behind the daemonist, ugly, human-like figures started floating toward us across the shore of muddy waves. What had started out as one or two figures rapidly filled the shore, forming an army.

The colors of their bodies kept changing, rapidly oscillating from red-brown to jet black and gray. But they were unmistakably daemons.

"Gaaah, gaaah, graah..."

"Greee..."

"Muh...Mar...Margil..."

The army of daemons lined up behind their monochrome master

like a wall. One of them was clearly calling my name.

“Baron Corbal...?”

There was a small imp with two horns and a slender, twisted body. Its face was none other than...Baron Corbal's. The man I'd fought with in Relis City. His soul had been trapped in this place.

“Death here is death of the soul. Even if you don't die, but are trapped here, your physical body in the real world will be rendered comatose.” The monochrome daemonist explained it to me very nicely, perhaps because he wanted me to understand just how much of a disadvantage I was at here.

“Mana doesn't work inside the spirit of a daemon. Lord Margilus, perhaps you have already learned special sorcery from the *The Meaning of Life*, but that power is useless here.”

Huh? He was misunderstanding.

He was probably talking about my knowledge of “magic,” as he'd heard about it from daemonists I'd fought like Baron Corbal, or from daemons. He didn't know I had a whole different kind.

Well, that was convenient...

“I'm sorry, it's a huge decision. Please give me some time to think about it.” My face probably looked distressed. I raised one hand to hide it and retreated.

“Gi-gaaa... Gah, graah!”

“Gi-geee... Gi-geee...”

A swarm of daemons large enough to block my line of sight was approaching, as inevitable as gravity.

“You've talked enough. I'm perfectly fine with turning you into a vegetable right here and now.” The daemonist might not have had a face, but he looked irritated all the same.

“L-Lord Wizard? Is that possible?” The mystic looked back at me, concerned.

I really did want more time, and it wasn't a lie that the decision was a big one. But the decision I was talking about was a very different one than what our pale host had in mind.

While weakly raising one hand to hide my mouth, I'd started forcefully chanting a spell.

There were two problems. One was the ethical issue. The spell I was about to use had inhumane effects, and I'd never wanted to use it in my entire life.

The other was a more serious issue. I wasn't sure I'd be able to use this spell inside the spirit world of a daemon. As a test, I'd gone into my inner world once, right after going through the door. So now I knew something the monster didn't: I could cast my spells here.

"It's heavier than usual..."

I became my imagined self in my inner world—the internal me that my true self imagined—while I was already imagining myself in the consciousness of a daemon. It was like I was seeing a dream inside of a dream (and only with conscious effort).

That awkwardness expressed itself as a tangible weight.

For example, normally, in my inner world, the lantern light shone five meters in diameter. However, the light I had in my hand now only showed me what was right in front of my eyes. After that was darkness. Just imagining what was ten centimeters around me required so much concentration that I thought my brain cells would burst. I suppose that was to be expected, since my brain was being forced to work more than twice as hard as normal.

"The eighth level sure is far..."

Both my head and body felt heavy, and I couldn't see well. I went through the Gate of Magic and down the spiral staircase, feeling as if I was walking underwater.

The heaviness intensified as I went down the levels. I thought my brain would fry just trying to maintain my imagined self; I was in no condition to climb stairs.

Somehow, I managed to make it to the eighth-level spellbook archive. I opened the heavy door—it felt like it had rusted—and approached the charged books on the nine pedestals within.

"I'm going to see if I can use this here..."

I pointed to the book I had in mind and started to release the

chaotic energy in the form of magical power. The book responded to my chanting, lighting up and changing into two ten-sided dice. One was white and the other was black. They were the familiar percentage dice.

“Argh... My head!”

While enduring the terrible headache, I threw the dice onto the pedestal. *Now, as long as the execution doesn't fail...*

Clack. Clack.

The white die bounced on the pedestal and landed on zero. And then the black die...also rolled zero.

“Huh?”

It was a fumble.

Fwooooooo!

The dice became a vortex of dazzling light and went berserk.

When normal spells ended in a fumble, it only meant one wasted spell. But here, in the inner world of an inner world, and a special environment at that, the runaway chaotic energy swelled infinitely, swallowing up whatever was around it. This was just a temporary space created by my consciousness in a corner of the sea of chaos. The collapse of that space meant that my consciousness itself would soon be swallowed by chaos.

I desperately focused my will and tried to fixate on the image of a solid wall, floor, and myself.

“Wh-whoa!”

Me, the archive, everything...into the light...

I was swallowed by the sea of chaos.

Chaos was the root of all possibilities. The majority were negative, but if I could connect to one of the rare positives, there was a slim hope of returning to reality.

I desperately tried to maintain my form.

I am an ordinary, forty-two-year-old bachelor who works in an office.

I commute to work by bus every morning, work without excessive overtime or stress, play computer games at night, and sometimes dabble in making TTRPG rulebooks and supplements that honestly have no shot at commercial success...

I was a junior high school student born into a poor family. I spent as much as time as possible in the classroom alone, bought only one piece of bread for lunch, and had a secret part-time job at night.

I was a private detective in America in the 1900s. A frightened young man asked me to investigate the strange phenomenon that occurred in the house of his uncle who'd suddenly died. I headed to a town in Massachusetts with a congenial newspaper reporter and a bored doctor...

I was one of the adventurers based on the frontier. With fellow bandits, monks, and warriors, I stamped out the goblins and fished for treasures left in the ruins...

No, wait. That wasn't right.

I am Geo Margilus, a powerful wizard who transmigrated to Sedia from Japan.

I am the Great Wizard Geo Margilus.

I am Lord Geo Margilus.

I am Geo.

Who am I?

What am I?

Me?

I—

“Geo!”

I responded to that voice, coming from so far away.

There was a stone tower. In that room, a girl with chestnut hair

was picking something up off the floor. It was a piece of parchment.

“A character sheet?”

A lot of numbers and terms that the girl was unfamiliar with were written in small letters on the parchment. But there was also a part that she could understand. It was the text under “Character Name.”

Is this...Geo's? the girl thought when she looked at the parchment.

“I wonder how Geo's doing.”

The name that the girl recognized on the parchment was “Geo Margilus.”

I was the one written on that sheet.

Me.

To be precise, my consciousness had returned to the eighth-level spellbook archive of the inner world within the inner world. The book I'd tried to use just now—had I really tried to use it?—had failed, and yet there it was there on its pedestal as if nothing had ever happened.

It seemed I'd come back from the chaos at a slightly different time than I'd left it, so that made sense.

“Ugh.”

A huge amount of information was swirling around in my brain, stuffed in there from when I'd become a man without a name, without a self, blanked out of the world. That man desperately scrabbled to retain the information that would probably go foggy a few seconds later. The truths of the universe, the meaning of human existence, the reason why life was born. I knew the answer to every mystery in the world...but...damn, now it was all gone!

No...there was a small amount of that information left in my brain. It was the appearance of the world, as I'd seen it, apart from the constraints of time. The world was beginning and ending simultaneously. All the worlds were the same, in the sense that they were born and destroyed along the predefined rails of time. I also remembered that I already knew the world as it was.

I remembered that life was what we called a “story.”

“Uh, can you get it together, please? I’m not going to wait any longer for your answer.”

In the spirit world of the daemons, the monochromatic daemonist held up his hand. It was the moment of his final ultimatum. At that same time, I was deep in my own inner world, trying once again to release the chaotic energy condensed into a book.

“As a consequence of this spell, the soul of the being at whom I aim my hand shall serve me and be mine to control. *Mind Control!*”

PA-KRISH!

There was a sound like ice being crushed. It was the sound of the dozens of silvery-white glass tentacles shooting out from around my feet.

The glass tendrils stretched out swiftly, instantly wrapping around the daemonist’s smooth, white body.

“Wh-what is this?! Sorcery?! No!”

The mystic was still hanging on. “Lord Wizard!”

The pure white monster kicked and struggled, trying to break free. But the power of the glass tentacles (or the energy of the spell they embodied) was too strong, and soon he couldn’t move.



“It’s a spell that dominates the spirit of the target and forces subservience.”

“You don’t have that power...”

“I never wanted to use this spell...”

The Rank 8 spell *Mind Control* was the mightiest spell to affect your opponent’s spirit. Unlike *Curse*, the subject of the spell did not realize that they were under an enchantment, and always swore absolute allegiance to the magician. You couldn’t go as far as to make the subject commit suicide, but all other behavior, even going against their own beliefs or principles, was allowed under the rules.

It was really just brainwashing. It was undoubtedly an evil act to manipulate a human spirit using these spells in a game, let alone real life. When I’d learned that the ritual of prophecy meant infiltrating the spirit world of the daemons, I’d prepared this just in case it was possible...

“Thank god... I think...”

Just this one time, given the opponent, I had no other choice. Or at least that’s what I told myself.

“Oh! Uh... Muh...Margilus...”

Many glass tentacles had penetrated the monochrome being’s head. It was a grotesque sight, but I already felt that the power of my spell controlling his soul.

“First, make these daemons stand down! Next...your name and position. You’ll tell me everything.”

The duration of *Mind Control* was permanent until the spell was broken. There was tremendous value in having a high-ranking daemonist as a servant.

“A-as you comma—”

A voice of despair dripped from its slash of a mouth, now turned down pathetically. It might even be possible to exterminate all the daemonists right here and now. It would be a great achievement, even

if it was impossible to fully suppress the generation of daemons.

Just then, I turned my attention to a small but strong glimmer of hope.

“You cannot control me!”

“Huh?!”

Its mouth grew and grew, becoming a gaping abyss. Even though his white body was being ripped apart by the glass tentacles, he raised both arms high in resistance.

Before I could grasp what was happening...

“Graaargh!”

The swarm of daemons had retreated a bit...but far behind him, there it was. The towering giant turned his face this way. The King of Daemons looked upon us.

He swung his hand, which was as large as a castle or even a town, down upon us.

This was the daemons’ spirit world.

In this unique realm, the concept of size was almost completely irrelevant. However, when something that covered your entire line of vision was dropping down upon you at high speed, it was terrifying.

If this was the real world, my flesh and I would’ve both been pulverized in an instant.

Instead, we were subsumed within a sea of warm, sticky mucus. Apparently, the giant humanoid (or its fingertip) had swallowed us whole. I could barely make anything out, but I could see a bit and I could breathe.

The swarm of daemons that had filled the shore had already been crushed and assimilated. Only the elf maiden and myself, clinging together, remained in our original forms. And then...I could see the pure white daemonist, still restrained by my glass tentacles.

“Ah! Aaaagh!”

He screamed ceaselessly, twisting his body into strange

contortions. His spirit-body was slowly slipping free from the tentacles, the embodiment of the *Mind Control* spell.

The spell's power worked perfectly. However, it wouldn't be of any use if his spirit-body lost all form. He was trying to assimilate with the King of Daemons, too.

"Stop it! I will not allow you to die!"

"This is not death! It's just changing the state of my spirit... Although my body in reality will die during the transition...or so I think."

He'd probably decided to destroy his spirit before being completely brainwashed by the power of the spell.

"Before you disappear, tell me! Where is your home base? What do you do there?!"

"I don't know! Even if I'm gone...the daemons will come! The third brood event is less than ten years away!" Cackling in hatred, shamelessly exuding malice and spite, the daemonist's monochrome body crumbled apart. As he vanished, his last words echoed. "Suffer and despair!"

Without anyone left to control, the tentacles disappeared as well.

"This...?"

I watched the monochrome body melt away into the surrounding mucus, resigned to my fate...but then I cried out in surprise. I realized that the mystic and I were surrounded by a strong, silvery-white barrier.

"It's the *Mind Wall* spell that I used before the ritual."

"So, this light is protecting us."

Mind Wall, as the name suggests, has the effect of blocking all mental attacks. Without this protection, we would have been swallowed by the body of the King of Daemons in the same way as the daemonist, and lost our souls.

"Our work here is done. I think we should be heading back, what do you think?"

“I agree... It certainly was a strange experience.”

I didn't know how to respond when a mystic who'd performed this ritual for five hundred years said something like that. Anyway, we'd achieved our original objective, uncovered the mechanism of the prophecy, and also eliminated the culprit (even if it was just their spirit).

I'd also determined that at this point in time it was impossible to communicate with the King of Daemons. This wasn't an issue of the evilness or intelligence of the daemons, but how purely alien they were from human thought.

Now all we had to do was get back safely.

“Right...” I saw the spool that the mystic held in one hand. In the space of the muddy sea, that red thread was clearly stretching to a higher place. When we gently tugged on it, it slowly lifted our bodies into the air.

“Lord! My lord!”

It was a voice I was very familiar with. The desperation in that voice brought my consciousness back to reality.

And somehow, I knew this was the real world. I looked at the darkening sky. I looked at the entrance to the cave. There was a large, soft, *living* thing clinging to my chest as I lay on my back.

“Reyha!”

“Oh...my lord!”

It was my faithful dark elf. It seemed like she was trying to cover me up with her body, as she moved her face right up to mine. There were tears in her purple eyes. In her hand was a red thread that she'd wrapped around her hand so many times that her skin had grown discolored.

“Did you notice? It was great. It was really great,” Reyha mumbled, her face buried in my chest.

Sedam sounded bored. “I don't really know what you're talking about, but it sounds like it one hell of a great adventure. Good work.”

When I moved my face, while stroking Reyha's head, the women of the warrior clan came to care for us.

So, we were safe for now.

"Lord Wizard. Please rest." Even the superhuman beauty of the mystic showed signs of fatigue and relief.

Luckily, neither the mystic nor I were particularly upset.

When the mystic and the warrior clan examined the cornerstone, or rather, the corpse of the daemon in the cave, they found that it seemed to have collapsed in on itself and was rapidly decaying. The cause was not clear, but for now, rituals of prophecy could no longer take place.

Incidentally, the ESP Medal was also warped, as if it had nearly melted in a powerful heat, and could no longer be used.

The mystic remained stoic. "If we were able to influence the spirit of the daemon that strongly, then perhaps this outcome was inevitable."

"To think that such a mythical adventure could take place in the current day. Although you're practically a walking myth yourself, now that I think about it."

We were recuperating in the spartan quarters we'd borrowed from the warrior clan. When Sedam heard about everything, his expression was a mixture of admiration and envy.

"I keep turning the whole thing over in my head, and even though it sounds like a nightmare, I still wish I'd gone with you."

"If I have to go through that again, you're definitely coming."

That said, I hoped I would never have to experience it again. And the cornerstone had disappeared. I felt a bit worried about what might happen to the warrior clan going forward.

"I am just relieved from the bottom of my heart that you are safe,

my lord. If something had happened to you, I wouldn't know what to say to your fiancée and her sister..."

"Well," I told Reyha, "from what Sedam tells me, it's only thanks to you that I was able to return safely."

As Sedam told it, a few hours after the mystic and I had gone into the cave, the red thread had started being pulled by some incredible force. Reyha and the attendants desperately had held the thread strong, until we both came flying out of the cave.

I shuddered to think of what might have happened if Reyha had given up and let go of the thread.

"Anyway," said Sedam. "Do you think your adventure produced satisfactory results?"

It hit me all at once. "Oh yeah! I learned something amazing!"

"Really?!"

How could I have forgotten? I grabbed Sedam's shoulders. He would definitely be surprised to hear the truth of this horrifying world.

"What did you learn?"

"Listen! The world—"

"The world...?"

"Wait a second..." *What was it? Wait! It was extremely important information. I couldn't have forgotten it! Wait...*

"I can't say it perfectly, but I definitely learned some important information. It was worth the danger."

Yes. That was it. The allegations against me were completely cleared. The daemonist had been manipulating information. Clearing this up was big. I'd also learned that some of the daemonists were interfering with the consciousness of the daemons. Most of all, the final words of that white monster...

"The third brood event...a massive outpouring of daemons... It's going to happen within the next ten years!"

Even though the daemonist had resisted me, it would've been difficult for him to lie to the wizard controlling him. In other words...

"From now on, there will be fewer daemonists that open up random Epicenters to summon daemons. Maybe none at all."

“But it’s only a reprieve. A brood event will occur within the next ten years.”

“Ahhh...”

Sedam and I looked at each other and sighed.

“If you killed a senior daemonist, then that’s wonderful,” said one of the elders. Eads, I think his name was. “Even making him into a vegetable is nearly as good.”

A day had passed.

I’d reported on the situation to the Council of Elders in their tent. There were deep lines on Eads’s face, but he had a fearless smile.

“Although I do apologize, since it seems I’ve ruined a traditional ritual of the warrior clan.” I bowed upon the carpet on which I sat. The warriors present, the mystic, the three elders, and Canberils all took in breaths.

“Lift your head. The mystic explained that point to us already. We’re convinced it was unavoidable,” said Caraon, the plump elder.

“I appreciate your saying so.” I knew the mystic would try to apologize to me, so I obediently raised my head.

I understood her point about me being the victim and how she should be apologizing to me, but it was a sign of respect for the clan that had fought off the daemons for five hundred years.

Elder Dalegilo rubbed at his chin. “It certainly is a disadvantage to no longer be able to use the ritual...”

“But with more information on the daemonists and the coming brood, we can investigate even further than before,” said Canberils calmly.

I was grateful for that sentiment, but when I’d first visited them, they’d said that they absolutely must not lose the power of prophecy. What had changed their attitude?

“I don’t know when it started, but to think that the prophecy ritual was being controlled by daemonists... That means even if the

ritual were to resume, the same crisis might recur.”

“If that’s the case, then we don’t need the prophecy.”

“This is the collective decision of the Council of Elders.”

The three elders and the warlord all sat up straight and bowed.

“You have become great warriors. You inspire me to labor even more deeply for the warrior clan.” The elf maiden smiled, her words as gentle as ever.

That is how I won the trust of the elders of the warrior clan and their mystic.

I proposed having them join my alliance, but the elders responded firmly. “It would be detrimental to your cause to form an alliance with the feared and loathed warriors.” The way they said it so calmly nearly brought tears to my eyes.

I didn’t agree with their assessment, but I wasn’t going to change everything overnight. For now, I’d at least managed to get them to be a silent partner with the alliance.

After shaking each of the three elders’ hands, the black-haired elf maiden said, “Please tell all my children to be good.”

They took us back on the Moonlight Ship. I wanted them to fly us all the way to the castle on their surprisingly powerful jellyfish-powered boat, but they refused to let the cat out of the bag on one of their biggest secrets.

“Ahh...home at last. Hmm? What’s this?”

I went through the gate to the front of the main tower. When I looked around there, I found the barracks, residential buildings, and main tower all surrounded by scaffolding, with dwarves and laborers hard at work.

Most notably, the main tower was covered with a large cloth that

rendered it almost invisible. I'd thought the upper courtyard construction was supposed to be mostly complete.

"Welcome home, Master Margilus!"

"You must be tired!"

"Mmm."

While my head was still tilted to the side in consideration, everyone from the castle came out to greet me. As I started talking about the trip, they kneeled.

"Umm, everyone? While I was gone..." Feeling their gazes, full of respect and trust, I thought I had to say something meaningful. But I couldn't find the words.

"M-Margilus? What are you doing back so early?!"

Beyond the kneeling soldiers and servants, I heard a familiar angry voice, coming from a blonde sorceress. Her blue eyes were open wide with excitement. She looked equal parts surprised and angry.

"I came home, Clara."

"Uh, well, this..."

She looked to me, then to the construction, and back to me again, her face bright red.

What was it?

When I'd departed, I hadn't known how long the trip would take, and I'd said it would probably be a month or two. Even so, why was she complaining about me coming home early?

Could it be...? I thought of those insecticide commercials back in Japan. The song goes that the husband works hard and makes money and has to leave the house.

No, it couldn't be that. I wasn't even a husband.

"Clara? What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Er. No, not really... It's nothing. Welcome home." Clara waved her hands around to avoid my question. There was *something*, though. It was there written on her red face.

"Be honest. Is there a problem?"

"I told you it was nothing. And I'm busy now, so I'll see you later."

“Hey, wait...” As usual, I was powerless to stop her.

Clara spun on her heel. Her blonde hair fluttered as she jogged away.

“What in the world was that?” I looked around me. That’s when I realized that everyone in the castle had watched that whole exchange.

“Ahhh...”

“Poor Clara...” For some reason, all these people who adored me were taking Clara’s side. Particularly the women. I got the feeling they thought I was to blame for something.

“Umm, Geo... Er, Mister Geo?” It was the one and only Mora, in her maid’s uniform, pulling on my sleeve as I looked up to the sky.

Mora gestured that I should lean down, so I did and she whispered in my ear.

“Clara was reforming the castle while you were away, and she planned to greet you with a coat of arms.”

“Coat of arms?”

“The coat of arms for you and the castle! She said you need it for diplomacy. A letter came from Elisabeth asking about it. You can’t make the right impression without one!”

In other words, it was my personal mark. My lordly signature.

Indeed, it wasn’t so strange that I would have something like that as lord of a territory. Actually, I needed one.

But since I’d come back before the coat of arms was finished, it wasn’t her mistake. She shouldn’t be upset about it...

“Ugh. That’s not the problem.”

“Huh?”

Mora was frowning at my response. I looked at her adorable face, and then something came to me. “That’s it. Mora, thank you. You saved me.”

“Huh?!”

I didn’t know exactly why I was doing it, but I stroked Mora’s hair over and over. For some reason, I had an overwhelming sense of gratitude toward her. “You’re always saving me.”

“Umm, Geo! I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you’re

wrong. You need to go. I mean I'm happy, but—"

"Margilus!" While I was talking to Mora for the first time in what felt like forever, Clara's voice interrupted us. At some point, she'd ended up at the top of the tower.

"What's wrong, Clara? You don't have to feel bad..."

"Feast your eyes on this!" As Clara yelled out from the roof, she kicked the fastener of the cloth that was covering the tower. The cloth caught in the wind and peeled away from the roof.

"Stars...and a book?"

On the wall was a beautiful engraving of the coat of arms. The pattern was a shining polar star and an open book.

"The guiding star..." Suddenly, I realized Lade was next to me.

"It is the star of hope shown to those who are lost in the dark." Reyha was naturally already behind him.

"It is the guardian star that gives wisdom to wanderers and adventurers like us who have no home," Sedam explained, standing next to Lade.

"A star of power! The wrath of the heavens to purify all evil! This is our Castle Getaeus's coat of arms!" Clara put both hands on her hips and puffed up her chest as she called out. She was like a heroine out of a book. *Hey, that's my coat of arms.*

"You really took the look of this place to the next level..."

"Geo, this castle gives us all hope!"

Mora looked up at me as I patted her on the head. Her small hands, which grabbed the hem of my robes, were getting more scabbed each day. Mora and my other companions...they never found hope only in my powers. *The people of Sedia will gather here with me and face the daemons. That is hope.*

"Margilus," Ild said to me. "Say something." He looked gravely serious.

Maybe it was because of the adventure I'd just finished within the realm of the daemons' spirit...but I grew awfully sentimental.

My friends thought that coat of arms suited me. I was so glad that everyone trusted me. I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

“Y-yes...I should.”

The soldiers, servants, dwarves, Schultz clan, warrior clan, students, and dark elves had all gathered. They applauded and cheered. In ten years, the third brood event might come. What could I do until then?

My face felt heavy. The proper, inspiring speech just wouldn't come. Tears running down my cheeks, I spoke the words that rang truest in my heart. “Thank you, everyone...”

I didn't know what was right. But I would forge ahead, nervous and trembling. As long as I was here with my friends, my story would continue.

Dungeons & Braves

Character Sheet

Character Name

Geo Margilus

Setting Material

Dungeons & Dragons Character Sheet

Player Name

Game Master Name

Yagi-chan

Character Name

Geo Margilus

Character Appearance



Class

Magic User

Level

36

Hit Points

66

Ability Scores

10

STR

(STRENGTH)

BONUS

18

INT

(INTELLIGENCE)

+3

13

WIS

(WISDOM)

+1

10

DEX

(DEXTERITY)

BONUS

16

CON

(CONSTITUTION)

+2

13

CH

(CHARISMA)

+1

Resistance

S

Poison

S

Light

S

Paralysis

AA

Area Attack

S+

Magic Curse

Special Abilities

Magic Item Creation: Expert
Poison Creation: Advanced
Construct Monsters Expert
Weapon Proficiency (Quarterstaff): Intermediate

Titles

Ally of Calbanera Knights
True Friend of Axelholm
Lord of Castle Getaeus
Fiancé of Duke's Daughter
Protector of Relis

Equipment

ORDINARY EQUIPMENT

caster's
water flask
rations
elfwood net
sewing set
cloak
hand mirror
portable pen and ink set
iron pieces of parchment
flint bag
head cloth
change of clothes
skullcap
dagger
three-wound pot
MAGIC ITEMS
Staff of Wizardry
Ring +1
Protection Ring +5
Traveling Boots
Infinity Bag
Potion Carver
Quarterstaff +1 (light)
Staff of Unholy Control
Dagger +1 (returning)
Whip +1
Censer/Rod
Medical Ring
Water Walking Ring
Resist Fire Ring
Spirit Ring
Cursed Command Ring
Teleport Lens
Protection Circle Cloth
Pest Wolf Glove
Elven Cape
Elven Boots
Envy Detection Wand
Dinner Cloth
ESP Medal
Anti-ESP Medal
Mapping Scroll
All-Shape Tool Set
Arcane Smelting Tool Set
Arcane Quill
Soldiers of Bronze
Ultimate Coffer
Skull of Nameless God

Walter

P P : 5 7 0 2 0

G P : 3 0 5 5 2 3 8

E P :

S P : 2 5 8 0 0

C P : 5 8 0

Total : A lot!!

Magic

RANK 1 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Charm
Analyze
Lapis Ruler
Alarm Bell
Protection
Transmute
Steel Copy
Alarm Shield
Sleep
Light

RANK 2 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Permanence Light
Detect Enemy
Detect Invisible
Telepathy
Invisibility
Find Object
Illusion
Spider web
Water Key
Average
Arcane Nutcrack

RANK 3 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Spot Magic
Fireball
Fly
Hold
Infrared Vision
Lightning
Protection Circle
Protection from Arrows
Water Breathing
Phantom Horst
Arcane Rope

RANK 4 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Greater Protection Circle
Confusion
Short Warp
Control Plane
Illusory Terrain
Ice Storm
Ice Wall
Concealment
Transform Other
Wall of Fire
Cure Break
Alarm Sight

RANK 5 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Alarm Strike
Control Unholy
Full Cloud
Elemental Control
Greater Hold
Mana Pile

Protection

Tabletless

Wall of Stone
Physical Bonds
Exchange

RANK 6 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Anti-Magic Barrier
Death Curse
Destruction
Control
Unholy Demon
Petrify
Project Illusion
Purgatory
Wall of Iron
Weather Control
Furor March

RANK 7 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Control Sign Pattern
Jaws of the Adapt
Control Monster
Psychometry
Dimensional Door
Greater Invisibility
Mind Crush
Control Sanctuary
Change Status
Apoptosis
Arcane Deard

RANK 8 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Gate Mana Strike
Perfect Resistance
Clothing
Blood Cloud
Control Control
Invisibility
Invisibility
Invisibility

RANK 9 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Control Monster: Special
Six Names
Control Monster: Special
Word of Blind

RANK 10 SPELLS: 9 CHARGES/DAY

Emergency
Alarm Control Plane
Word of Death
Dimensional Gate
Complete Recovery
Invisibility
Control Wall
Control
Time Stop

Jewels

15000GpX5

5000GpX58

2000GpX135

1000GpX523

Experience Points

MAX!!

Bonus

+10

EXP to Next Level

Max Level!!

Sedia Sorcery

Principles of Sorcery

Sorcery is a skill for transforming or creating physical phenomena, such as flames, using internal magic. From the perspective of sorcerers, connecting with that power requires the appearance of a Sorcery Frame, which displays magical runes and details about one's mana capacity. Average mana capacity for high-level sorcerers is 300, and about 50 for lower-level sorcerers. Mana itself is unevenly distributed throughout the world. A variety of materia and foci are made using Maleithrilin and sacred trees, but these are extremely expensive.

Sorcerer's Guild

This organization is led by the Grand Magister, and governs all the sorcerers on the continent. Its headquarters is located in Shrendal, and there are branches throughout the land. Sorcerers are a privileged class akin to the aristocracy, and even branch offices have a large effect on local political ecosystems.

There are some unaffiliated humans who use sorcery naturally, without Guild membership. Such individuals are considered heretics, known by terms like "Witch Doctor" or "Hedge Mage."

The Four Schools of Sorcery

There are four factions of sorcery, which differ greatly in their approach towards the art.

Faction of the Blessed: This faction believes that sorcery is a wisdom granted by Rimeydal in order to further human development and material prosperity. Common in the north.

Faction of Conquerors: This faction believes that sorcery is a weapon granted by Rimeydal in order to fight daemons. Many in Ryuse follow this creed.

Faction of Scholars: The objective of this faction is sorcery research. This faction is especially skilled at creating materia and other magical artifice. Also known as the Faction of the Wise.

Faction of Esoteric: This faction aims to unravel all the secrets of the world through the power of magic. Very few sorcerers belong to this faction.

Sedia Religions

On the continent of Sedia, it is believed that Rimeydal created the world and its people from nothing, and then departed on a cosmic journey. Thus, there is no order that directly worships Rimeydal. Instead, the widespread belief is that Rimeydal entrusted management of the world to a pantheon known as the Eight Pillar Gods. There is a clerical order devoted to each of the gods, but there are very few priests who can channel sacred magic. Consequently, except for Pendargund's faithful, the influence of religious orders on the Sorcerer's Guild is meager.

The Eight Pillar Gods

God of Law, Pendargund

Goddess of Winter, Ashginea

God of War, Langer

Goddess of Spring, Lucia-Cecille

God of Night, Soul

God of the Sea, Tegzanac

God of Death, Niavone

God of Air, Hylian

Sacred Magic

This power uses mana in much the same fashion as sorcery, but the priests interpret their power as “miracles granted by god.” As such, they don't get along well with sorcerers. Generally, practitioners possess numerous abilities that help with healing and purifying the undead, but they can also obtain additional special magics that reflect the attributes of the god they believe in. However, it is extremely rare for a sacred sorcerer to be skilled enough to heal people dying of a terminal illness or mortal wound. The acquisition and training methods for sacred

magic have not yet been systematized, so talents other than sorcery—known by its users as “the grace of god”—tend to be the main focus of clergy.

Temple of the Law

An organization which draws its membership from the clergy of all eight gods, the Temple of the Law has the power to pass judgment on all royal decrees. It is more like an arbitration organization than a religious order. The temple almost never interferes in secular affairs, but when the Temple issues an edict, not even Shrendal can object to its decrees.

Sedia Continent Timeline According to Shrendal's Official History

Year 0: Founding of Shrendal

Year 100: Alliance formed between Shrendal and the Land of Giants

Year 120: Founding of the ancient Divine Kingdom on the eastern side of the continent

Year 800: Shrendal's territory expands to the easternmost side of the continent

Year 810: The Divine King attacks Qadr Brueys, the Library of the Age of Gods

Year 815: The first brood event occurs. The ancient divine kingdom and other countries on the eastern side of the continent are destroyed

Year 817: A hero destroys the Epicenter. The Warrior Clan begins its endless hunt

Year 850: Foundation of the Land Barthes kingdom

Year 1102: Establishment of the Sorcerer's Guild in Shrendal

Year 1105: Land Barthes approaches the empire of the dragonkin

Year 1134: The second brood event occurs. Massive damage is done to the Lake Ryuse communities

Year 1135: Shrendal forms a grand alliance to counter the daemon brood

Year 1138: The allied forces defeat the daemon legion in the Battle of Daybreak Plains

Year 1140: Sorcerer's Guild divides into four factions

Year 1142: Shrendal builds a large fortress on the Daybreak Plains. Calbanera Knights established

Year 1143: Western Kingdom and Ryuse Kingdom gain independence from Shrendal

Year 1175: Shrendal loses its fortress in the Storm of the Dead incident

Year 1253: Dragon Empire invades Land Barthes

Year 1255: The "Evil Minister" gains independence from the Land of Giants

Year 1256: Ryuse Kingdom is divided. Velde established on eastern side of continent

Year 1260: Land Barthes and dragonkin establish armistice

Year 1269: Ryuse Alliance is formed

Year 1277: General Darmund seizes Filsand

Year 1285: Calbanera Knights fail in to retake the Shrendal fortress

Year 1290: Daemon nest emerges in Lauris, capital of Ryuse Kingdom

Year 1300: Great Wizard, Geo Margilus appears

Afterword

AN ENTIRE YEAR has passed. My name is Mikawa Souhei.

I'm very sorry that it's late to the presses, but thanks to you, I had the opportunity to write Volume 3 of *Magic User*. It's really all thanks to the support of readers like you. Thank you very much.

The first volume was an adventure that spanned an abandoned castle, a dungeon, and towns. Volume 2 was about construction and wilderness adventure. In *Rules Cyclopedia* terms, the adventures started out at the beginner level and then expanded to the expert level by Volume 3. This volume featured diplomatic negotiations, adventures through different dimensions, and even new companions. (Though just what "companions" means here might be a bit tricky if you're not familiar with a particular, older TTRPG!)

By the time we reach the third book, the main character has now truly become a great wizard, and he's got a little more confidence, but he's still not quite what you'd call a cheerful, devil-may-care hero. He progresses through the story, unable to deny his experience and common sense as a modern Japanese man, nor fully disregard the values of his new world. Some might think that's soft, but I think it's a much more difficult path than just choosing one or the other. I'm sure he will continue to struggle and lose his way.

On *Let's Be Novelists*, where I first posted this work, I also posted some of my thoughts about his adventures, so please take a look if you're interested.

There are some people I need to thank. Ryota-H for drawing such wonderful illustrations, even though I know you're so busy, thank you a lot. As usual, thank you for your dynamic, dramatic, outstanding illustrations. Lade really does look strong! And thank you to my second-generation editor, F, and third-generation editor, I. Your follow-up on my blunders really helped me out. Thank you to Tenkado NoNPoly for the new map design. It really is a fantasy map. It's perfect. Thank you to everyone who helped promote the previous volumes. I hope you will do the same for this volume (pleeeeeease).

Thanks to my long-time game buddies, J and Y. Please invite me

to events or barbeque anytime. And Y, you should probably start rolling around sometime soon.

Thank you to M from Nagoya, who wrote me my first-ever fan letter. I almost cried. Thank you very much. Dear readers of the webnovel version: Did the additional events surprise you? And thanks to everyone supporting me on social media, especially like A/P. I want to take you all to barbeque someday.

Finally, thank YOU for buying this book. Thank you very much.

If you thought this story was interesting, nothing could bring me greater joy.



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